

**THE EXPERIENCES OF A HIGH SCHOOL DANCE CURRICULUM ON
STUDENT ENGAGEMENT**

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by

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Abstract

This qualitative study explored six post high school students' experiences within one high school Dance Academy Program, over a four-year period, to learn if their dance experiences promoted student engagement. Student engagement occurs when students are invested in their learning, is the product of motivation and active learning, and is linked to student success.

Semi-structured individual and group interviews were used as instruments of data collection and the data was transcribed and analyzed. Four main themes emerged from this study in relation to the students' experiences within the Dance Academy in relation to student engagement: 1) increased self-confidence, 2) healthy relationships amongst peers and with their teacher, 3) a sense of belonging, and 4) increased feelings of self-worth. The outcomes from this study indicate that dance, as a part of a high school curriculum, was advantageous in providing these students with a unique learning experience that increased their relationship with curriculum and fostered student engagement.

Further research on the implications of teaching the arts, and in particular dance, in high school could benefit curricular programming and pedagogical practice.

Key words: high school, dance, student engagement, self-confidence, healthy relationships, sense of belonging, self-worth.

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Dancing has been a part of my life since I was old enough to walk. My mom has owned a dance studio before I was born and my love of dance came from her passion for the art. My teachers, studio parents, and dancers have been my extended family my whole life. Dancing has truly defined who I am. It brings joy to my life and has given me many experiences and opportunities for which I am extremely grateful.

At a very early age, I discovered the love of teaching through instructing dance classes at the studio along side my mom. This led me to pursue my Bachelor of Education degree at the University of Saskatchewan. It was a dream come true when the opportunity arose for me to teach a Dance Academy program at Prairie Collegiate. It afforded me the opportunity to pass my passion and love of dance onto many high school aged students. I loved every day that I taught dance at Prairie Collegiate. The students inspired me every day and I got to do the thing I loved to do most – DANCE.

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Chapter 1

“Great dancers are not great because of their technique, they are great because of their passion” ~Martha Graham

Coralee, the Dancer

Graham (1985) said it best when she said, “Dance is the hidden language of the soul (p.3).” For me, dance is embedded in my soul. My mom owned a dance studio before I was born and I grew up in that dance studio. My fondest memories of childhood are from dancing. Whether it was the evenings in the dance studio taking lessons from my mom, attending workshops, or travelling to out of town dance competitions, dance has afforded me great opportunities and experiences.

Dance is not easy and it takes hard work and determination. I can still remember trying to learn how to do double four count pick-ups in tap. I was watching my older sister’s class learn them and I was sitting and listening carefully to the instructions. I went out and practiced in the hall and could not do it. Frustrated, I went home and practiced in the basement. The next week I watched again. I was getting closer to perfecting the skill. I practiced and practiced until finally, I got the step I had been working so hard to perfect. I do not know whether I was more proud of the fact that I got it or that I could do it before my older sister, whom I looked up to so much.

I can remember the feeling when I showed my mom my double four count pick-ups. She was surprised because I had never been taught this skill in class. I also remember demonstrating the step for my sister’s much older class and how impressed they were that I could do it. They all clapped for me and told me how proud they were of me. What a confidence boost that was for me. Dance taught me that through hard work

and determination one can achieve almost anything. This experience and many others like it helped prepare me for other life experiences and have taught me to never give up. I learned through dancing that with practice, hard work, and determination I could be successful and achieve my goals. Dancing provided me with skills and assisted with my study habits and work ethics towards my education.

While growing up, dance gave me confidence and taught me to believe in myself. From performing at recitals, to attending competitions, to participating in workshops, I became more comfortable performing in front of people. This experience aided me in school with public speaking, in drama class, and in other extra-curricular activities such as cheerleading. Without dance in my life I probably would not have become a teacher.

I had amazing teachers and role models as dance instructors. They taught me more than dance. Reflecting on my student experiences from the lens of a teacher/researcher, I can see some of the pedagogical and curricular strategies that were taught by my dance teachers. I looked up to my dance teachers as role models. They taught me how to conduct myself in a positive way by instilling strong values and good morals. Ethical responsibilities were taught by encouraging me to win and lose graciously. Through the years I observed my teachers conduct towards others at competitions. They supported dancers from other studios and created a positive dance competition environment. Through dance classes I learned more than dance steps and proper dance technique and these observations transferred to my own teaching.

Dance has also taught me many valuable life lessons. I learned the importance of working together as a team, proper nutrition and exercise, and the power of believing in myself. These lessons that I learned through dance prepared me for life and went far

beyond the dance lessons and competitions that I attended. Projecting my own teaching strategies, as I look backwards and forwards, I can readily see how my pedagogical experiences as a student transferred to my own beliefs about teaching and to the experiences I afforded my students as they participated in the Dance Program at Prairie Collegiate.

Growing up, I benefitted in so many ways from dance. It was more than just the physical aspect of dance but it was the social and emotional aspects as well. Socially, I learned to work as a team with other dancers and emotionally, I learned how to deal with the pressures of competitions. I learned that at competitions it was only one judge's opinion and came to realize that if I felt that I had a great performance that was all that mattered. Growing up in a dance environment I did not realize that all of these experiences were preparing me for the future.

Dance benefitted me physically by keeping me in great shape. We talked about eating healthy in class and from a young age I wanted to put good things in my body to fuel me with the energy needed to perform adequately. As an adult, this early learning has served me well. Being committed to dance, I did not want to drink or smoke as that could affect my dancing and cause health problems. I was supported with this socially because my friends were girls with whom I danced. We all wanted to take care of our bodies and did not want to do something that could keep us from dancing. We all were against drinking, smoking, and the party scene. We supported each other and were great role models for each other.

Today, I am thankful for all my experiences growing up in a dance environment. Dancing taught me so much more than just dance; it prepared me for the future and pointed me towards a career in teaching.

Coralee, The Teacher

Growing up I spent all my evenings in the dance studio dancing and assisting my mom teaching classes at the studio. After many years assisting with dance classes and then later teaching classes, I knew I wanted to be a teacher. It was so gratifying to watch the dancers learn new steps and gain confidence. It felt as though I was making a difference in their lives. Watching dancers gain confidence, improve their dance skills and see their passion for dance made me believe that being a teacher would be a rewarding and enjoyable career. Although it was demanding to be involved at this capacity with dance, I did not find it a hardship because I loved everything about it. It was my escape, it fulfilled me, it taught me organization, time management, commitment, the value of planning lessons, which again provided professional competencies leading to my professional world.

After several years of experience in teaching, a Dance Academy opened in 2006 in a large urban center, which I will refer to as Prairie Collegiate. When I was approached to teach this Dance Academy program at Prairie Collegiate, I was ecstatic. I have always been passionate about dance and felt that dancing afforded me many great opportunities to learn and grow into a confident woman. I was extremely excited to be able to pass on my love of dance to others and give more students the opportunity to learn to dance.

The Dance Academy program was a new opportunity to explore and apply both passion and pedagogy with the students whom I taught. In the beginning it was important to explore possibilities and responsibilities for this program. I researched other Dance Academy programs, sought advice, and attended professional development opportunities to assist with designing a quality program that would encompass sound curricular content. A main curricular aim of mine was to develop a positive learning environment that could lead to positive student outcomes.

This new academy offered students an opportunity to experience a dance curriculum at school. Students could enroll in the program with no dance experience or they could have extensive dance training – all levels were accepted. The Dance Academy was an opportunity to create an experience for students to engage in dance, develop relationships, perform, and gain self-confidence. I saw a unique opportunity to foster a caring environment where everyone felt safe and supported by each other. Creating a positive, comfortable, learning environment would provide students opportunities to explore movements and take risks trying new steps and various dance styles without fear of ridicule or embarrassment. For many students this would be the first time they ever took a formal dance class. It was important to develop a program that students in the Dance Academy trusted both the teacher and classmates in this new environment.

During six years of teaching at Prairie Collegiate, I watched the dance program grow from one class offering per semester of approximately twenty students to being a full time offering, with hundreds of students in the program each year. As I continued my dance teaching in this setting, I began to sense and observe that something unique seemed to be occurring for the students in this dance program. I observed, what I believed to be

many positive outcomes for students who were studying dance as a part of their school experience. Students appeared to build strong relationships with peers, gain confidence in their performance abilities, be excited to come to class, attend regularly, be focused, and be engaged in their learning. This teaching assignment at Prairie Collegiate was a dream job because the students chose to be there, enjoyed being active, and developed rich relationships throughout the four years in the high school dance program. As a teacher, these observations led me to wonder if what I was observing were authentic experiences of students, or if, or how, this was impacting student engagement.

Research Question

For this research, I wished to explore six students' experiences within one high school dance program and learn if these experiences promoted student engagement.

Specifically, the questions were:

- 1) What were the experiences of six high school students who participated in one dance program over a four-year period?
- 2) Did these experiences contribute to increased student engagement?

Definition of Student Engagement

This research sought to explore the experiences of a high school dance program on student engagement. Student engagement occurs when students are invested in their learning (Barkley, 2009; Carini, Kuh, & Klein, 2006). "Student engagement is the product of motivation and active learning. It is a product rather than a sum because it will not occur if either element is missing" (Barkley, 2009, p. 10). As educators we know the importance of engagement and student learning (Taylor, & Parsons, 2011). Student engagement has been linked to student success (Carini, Kuh & Klein, 2006).

Engaged students tend to earn higher grades, perform better on tests, and drop out at lower rates, while lower levels of engagement place students at risk for negative outcomes such as lack of attendance, disruptive classroom behavior, and leaving school (Appleton, Christenson & Furlong, 2008, p. 383).

Active learning is described as a product of student engagement in the above definition. Active learning is not only about being physically active in class but it is about taking ownership in one's learning. Students demonstrating active learning show the desire to be a part of their learning process. Active learning can take on many definitions. Thematic words describing the adjective 'active' relate to energy, participation, engagement, and lively activity ("Active," 2014). In relation to education, our goal is to foster active learning within students that contributes to student engagement. When students are actively involved in taking ownership, being energized and diligent towards their learning, student engagement is a likely product.

Hidden vs. Explicit Curriculum

In the Dance Academy, the students studied the prescribed modules from the curriculum guides outlined by the Saskatchewan Ministry of Education. Many times, however, unexpected teaching and learning opportunities emerge in classrooms that are not planned or written and these are referred to as the hidden curriculum (Margolis, 2001). As Ornstein and Hunkins (2009) affirm the hidden curriculum while not written, or necessarily intended teaching, is learned by students. This knowledge gained by students is valued and the impact may go beyond standard content expected. The hidden curriculum can extend into students' values and beliefs. Jacob (2012) stated that, "it is what makes a subject meaningful and not a meaningless collection of facts" (p. 3). As

teachers, we should not overlook the role of the hidden curriculum in the classroom. Great learning can be sparked from class discussions that are unrelated to what the intended curriculum dictates.

As teachers, we have the opportunity to use day-to-day experiences to teach life lessons and prepare students for life outside of school. Examples might include: discussing ways to handle peer pressure on the weekends at parties, how to communicate positively and respectfully on Facebook, dealing with family issues such as death and divorce, and discussing with students how to handle traumatic situations such as suicide or cancer. I have experienced times in the classroom when these types of issues were brought up and rich discussions came about from them.

As a teacher, one example dealt with social media. In a Grade 9 Dance class there was a feud going on between a group of girls. One of the girls wrote a comment about another girl in class on her Facebook status. This led to other girls commenting on the status. The girls brought the issue into class and it was used as a teaching opportunity about using social media respectfully. I told them a few stories and left them with a saying I was taught growing up which is, "Say it, forget it; write it, regret it." The class was involved in the conversation and the students began to open up and share their own personal experiences. From that one discussion I gained trust from my students and it opened the door to many life discussions.

I also experienced a teen suicide teaching at Prairie Collegiate. This was traumatic for many dancers as they struggled to make sense of her death. On many occasions dancers would come into class visibly upset or wanting to talk about her death. I attended the funeral with the dancers, viewed her body with the girls, and we all cried

together. This very sad experience brought us together. We definitely had many discussions about dealing with issues such as discrimination, depression, and living life to the fullest. We dedicated a performance to her and took part in planting a tree to remember her life.

Handling a teen suicide was a very difficult and sensitive issue. Time and consideration was spent to ensure that the proper protocol was followed. Prior to the funeral I was in contact with the super-intendant of Prairie Collegiate to seek advise on handling this situation. I also was in touch with a family member of the deceased student to make sure that I understood the proper protocol for her funeral and was respectful of the ceremonies and traditions. At school notes were sent home to the parents explaining the tragic death and the supports that were in place. As a class we struggled to make sense of her death and mourned together. The involvement that I had with the funeral and with the students in the later months is not one that is expected. It occurred and felt natural because of the close relationship that we had with each other.

Once again these teaching opportunities were not part of the intended written curriculum but a valuable and meaningful experience for the students. The hidden curriculum often goes without recognition and "...deals with the socio-psychological interaction among students and teachers, with regards to their feelings, attitudes and behaviors" (Ornstein, 2003, p. 11).

Student grades are increasingly important in high school. "When teachers and schools put too much emphasis on grades, the hidden curriculum elevates correct answers over understanding, facts over ideas, conforming behavior over independent behavior, and getting on the honor roll over helping others" (Ornstein, 2003, p. 18). Students today

are not provided equal opportunities to explore a variety of academic areas of learning, especially the creative arts. There is an emphasis on math and reading scores instead of allowing students to explore and tap into their creative side.

The aim of teachers and schools is to create student producers, not thinkers.

Producers follow rules and conform to teachers' expectations. Thinkers raise questions, come up with novel answers, and grapple with ideas. In an era of curriculum standards and high-stakes testing, the emphasis too often is on fact accumulation rather than critical thinking. (Ornstein, 2003, p. 18)

The Dance Academy at Prairie Collegiate followed an explicit curriculum.

Burton (1998) described an explicit curriculum as “one that has been carefully designed, pilot tested by teachers and students, and then presented or published” (p. 4). The purpose of curriculum is to outline the provincial requirements for students in Saskatchewan as set out by the Ministry of Education (2010). The Dance Academy followed the curriculum modules, ensuring the curricular outcomes were met. The explicit curriculum uses documents such as the broad areas of learning and cross-curricular competencies to outline the formal educational structure.

In schools, curricula are developed to assist teachers in planning. Saskatchewan Ministry of Education (2010) has developed the Broad Areas of Learning that reflect the desired knowledge Saskatchewan Pre-K – Grade 12 students will achieve including sense of self, community and place, lifelong learners, and engaged citizens. The Saskatchewan Ministry of Education (2010) also outlined Cross-Curricular Competencies which will enhance student learning and goal competencies including: developing thinking,

increasing student identity and interdependence, improving literacy, and enhancing social responsibility.

In classrooms, teachers follow a planned or explicit curriculum (Kelly, 2009) that is designed to achieve the learning outcomes suggested through the curriculum. Teachers in Saskatchewan follow the Ministry of Education guidelines with goals and outcomes outlined within the organization of their lessons. The explicit curriculum deals with content and outcome related goals, assists with assessment, and responds to the professional responsibilities of planning and preparation. Through the teaching of well-planned lessons in the explicit curriculum, it is hoped that students will be engaged in learning and build new skills in relation to a particular subject area or integration of subject areas. While more structured and planned for than the hidden, emergent curriculum, both curricula are part of teachers' and students' everyday interactions in classrooms.

Program Description

The Prairie Collegiate Dance Academy program was unique in many ways. The Dance Academy was a one-hour dance class each day for one semester. Students earned one credit in Grades 9 through 12 for each grade level completed. The major aims of the dance program, as outlined by the Arts Education Curriculum document, were to develop, through experience, a lifetime appreciation of the Arts (Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, 2010; Saskatchewan Education, 1996). Goals outlined in the Dance curriculum document state that students will learn specific dances, create dances in order to express themselves, develop their dance technique, study dance artists, explain the roles of dance in the community, and gain understanding and appreciation of dance

through critical reflection. Using the aims and goals outlined in the curriculum document the Dance Academy program was developed.

Broad Areas of Learning formulated by the Saskatchewan Ministry of Education (2010) outlined desired attributes for Saskatchewan students in all curriculums. Lifelong learning is a key area that focuses on learning basic skills, engaging in lifelong learning, and experiencing a positive lifestyle. Encouraging students to be curious, observant, and reflective thinkers while exploring new knowledge in different subject areas are desirable learning outcomes. The dance program offered at Prairie Collegiate is a unique opportunity for students to experience these desired learning outcomes.

Planning experienced curriculum is the professional job of the teacher. Being mindful of the Broad Areas of Learning outlined by the Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, a planned curriculum was developed for the students to experience within their Dance program. Including paying attention to the academic, social, and physical elements of the learning process. As their teacher, I was mindful that students were exploring the Dance program from a variety of background experiences, as some students had no dance experience while others were seasoned dancers.

Recognizing student differences required planning for a learning situation that might be deemed uncomfortable, even “risky,” for some students, while others excelled and were comfortable in the dance environment. It was important to develop a learning environment where students felt safe to learn without risk of ridicule. Through a variety of well-planned progressions and learning opportunities in the Dance program, the discomfort was minimized and students were invited to experience a positive learning environment. For the students to feel comfortable, it was important to create a

welcoming environment. For example, in the dance studio at Prairie Collegiate, three walls have mirrors and the back wall is open glass to the outdoors. Blinds were drawn during instruction time across the open windows to eliminate any unwanted observers and to minimize student concerns. The mirrors, although intimidating at first, served as feedback to reveal dancer technique, show form (good or bad), help students see their movements, and ultimately over time, hopefully, increase self-confidence. The walls had encouraging phrases on them to inspire the dancers while in class. The dance studio at Prairie Collegiate also had a sprung floor and was an inviting place for the dancers to come together to learn about dance.

Physical skills as part of the program consisted of learning basic technique, combination of steps, exploring creative options, experiencing a variety of dance genres, and experiencing performance opportunities. A variety of progressive practice opportunities were implemented to help build self-confidence, master skills, build social constructs of teamwork, which ultimately lead to performance opportunities. An obvious outcome was experiencing physical activity, and increased self-awareness of potential.

At Prairie Collegiate, students selected dance as an elective course. The dance classes consisted of 20 to 30 dancers of both genders. Throughout the four years of high school, the beginner dancers and the advanced dancers worked and learned together. Through this process, the advanced dancers became role models to many of the less experienced dancers and the beginner dancers worked hard to keep up with the more advanced dancers. In the end, I observed that many dancers seemed to feel encouraged and supported by each other and a family atmosphere was established.

Programs evolve and change over time as a result of teaching, observing and interacting with students. Similar to other programs, the Dance program followed suit. Over the six years in which I taught in this program, changes to the curriculum were made to improve on instruction, practice, and student experiences.

The Dance Academy at Prairie Collegiate also allowed students to guide their own learning. Students, as a group, decided on the dance styles, selected the music and costumes and also were given opportunities to choreograph dances, both individually and as a group. All of these factors appeared to make this program a unique and rich experience for the students.

Class Description

The Prairie Collegiate Dance Academy was structured to ensure students would be active for one hour each day. For each class students were expected to change into dance clothes and put their hair up. The first part of the class was a full body stretch designed to improve flexibility and incorporated sit-ups and push-ups. After the students completed the warm up they would work on down the room progressions of jumps and turns followed by learning a dance combination. Each semester students would study four different styles of dance, which included jazz, lyrical, hip-hop, contemporary, tap, ballroom, African, Bollywood, Irish, and various other cultural styles of dance. The background behind each of the styles of dance and the dancers and choreographers that were most known for each style of dance was studied. Students would spend a large part of each class working on one of the dances. Each month focused on a new style of dance and at the end of the semester the dancers put on a recital to demonstrate their learning.

As the students entered the Dance Academy in Grades 11 and 12 they were

expected and encouraged to take on a leadership role in the class. Assignments throughout the semester had students leading class stretches and choreographing and teaching dances in small groups. In some cases students went out to teach dance to our neighboring elementary schools as part of the class.

Questions of Wonder

This study explored the experiences of a high school dance program on student engagement. Observing the numerous positive student behaviors and the development of students' dance skills in the dance program prompted me to reflect on the students' experiences within their dance classes. I wondered how their experiences affected their learning, student engagement, and the meaning within their experiences.

In 2010, as a major project in a graduate program evaluation course, I evaluated the Dance Academy at Prairie Collegiate. In this program evaluation, a confidential survey was conducted that included 18 multiple-choice questions and two open-ended questions. This was an optional survey completed at home by 67 current participants of the Prairie Collegiate Dance Academy. Students from each grade were well represented with most surveys completed by the Grade 9 student body and the least surveys being completed by the Grade 12 students.

Insight was gained from the students' responses to the survey questions and the feedback they provided in the open-ended questions. The evaluation suggested that students were satisfied with the dance program and they felt it was a great way to be active, and to make friends. The students commented that the dance class was a refreshing change from their other more sedentary classes. The program evaluation also shed light on areas of the program that could be improved.

The program evaluation examined whether students felt that the dance program met their expectations, and 97% of students reported that they either strongly agreed or agreed with that statement. In the open-ended questions on the survey, there were many students who wrote that it was their favorite class as it provided opportunities to meet friends, become part of a big dance family, improve on their dance skills, and experience a learning environment that promoted a strong sense of belonging.

The two open-ended questions looked at suggestions or feedback that could be made to make improvements to the Dance Academy Program. Suggestions included: treat everyone equally, provide more individual feedback on ways to improve skills, provide more performance opportunities and out of school community events, study more styles of dance, push beginner dancers harder, separate dancers into ability groups to build confidence, and offer dance in second semester for Grades 11 and 12.

The last question of the survey asked students how they would describe the Dance Academy Program to someone new to Prairie Collegiate. Students commented that through the program they experienced an encouraging learning environment, an opportunity to improve one's dance technique, a great place to meet friends, a chance to build confidence and self-esteem, a challenging dance program for all.

The survey questions and open-ended questions rated the Dance Academy highly and the comments were mostly positive. The students were very open about changes they would like to see put in place. The purpose of the evaluation was to determine the quality of the Dance Academy Program, find ways to improve the program, and understand students' perceptions and experiences.

As a result of the data gathered through the program evaluation, I wanted to further the investigation of former students' experiences within this dance program. Learning from the students' perspectives, of how the dance program at Prairie Collegiate impacted or did not impact their engagement in their high school experience could provide me with further insight into the strengths of the program. This research could also provide insight into opportunities for change where necessary. Further, I believed this information could also prove beneficial to school divisions and provide support for maintaining and extending dance education opportunities for high school students.

The goal of the research was to garner insight from six students' experiences within one specialized dance program and understand if this program influenced the students' overall engagement. The intention was to provide the Prairie School Division with outcomes and indicators of students' experiences in a dance program to further support educational initiatives through dance education in high schools. This research was also intended to suggest ways to improve dance programs such as the Prairie Collegiate Dance Academy. Another outcomes from this research was to contribute to professional development opportunities in the areas of dance education.

Observations of Contemporary Curriculum Issues

At times, students may go through school without becoming passionately engaged in their learning. We expect students to learn the same subjects, read the same books, and complete the same projects but sometimes we neglect their individual learning styles and interests. Educators need to be cautious not to marginalize students but instead offer them opportunities to study a variety of subject areas such as the arts. In today's society it appears that educational outcomes are often focused on test scores (Marsh, Pane, &

Hamilton, 2006). As a society emphasizing the importance of subject areas such as math, science, and English, we may send the message to students that these are the subjects of most worth with a more valued knowledge base (Spencer, 1966), diminishing the importance of the arts. As the Saskatchewan Ministry of Education places more emphasis on math, science, and English courses for post-secondary education, they limit the opportunities for students to explore other subject areas such as Arts Education.

Students are unique with many different interests and abilities. As educators we need to engage students by offering an academic program with many opportunities to find success and invest in their learning. The arts are an excellent way for students to explore learning in unique environments with unique subject content.

Maxine Greene (1995) and Nel Noddings (1992) are two advocates for the arts. Nel Noddings (1997) asserted that “not all intelligent people are attracted only to mathematics but that human interests vary widely and so should the education students receive” (p. 181). There is value in offering classes such as dance in high school as a way to engage the students in a unique learning experience. Noddings (1992) believed that the main aim of education should be to “produce competent, caring, loving and lovable people” (p. 8). Arts Education provides opportunities for students to build self-confidence, foster good relationships, and develop a sense of belonging in a unique learning environment. The arts promote creative, critical thinking and the use of the imagination beyond fact based learning.

Philosophically, Noddings (1995) was less concerned with achievement scores and stressed the importance of adapting the curriculum to fit the personal interests of the students and making the core subjects applicable to real life. Her philosophy supported

providing a wide variety of curricula opportunities for students to meet their growth and development as learners. Noddings (1986) discouraged the social stigmas related to specialization in the arts and suggested an art major should be no less respected than a business major.

Greene (2011) explained “without imagination, you live in a small room with the windows closed. Imagination opens the windows and shows us landscapes, horizons that we would not otherwise perceive...I want education to empower people to see possibility” (p. 212). Greene (1995) believed the arts should play a central role in schools as “teaching is not about filling students’ heads with knowledge; it is about helping them develop the ability to construct their own meaning” (p. 11).

Schools can impact student engagement and student achievement (Willms, et al., 2009, p. 5) by offering courses such as dance. Research shows that student engagement is linked to active learning (Barkley, 2009). Students who are engaged in learning demonstrate improved grades, a sense of belonging, stronger skills, and an improved self-perception (Willms et al., 2009). Dance empowers students to be creative and active and creates a unique environment for students to be engaged in their learning and gain confidence at the same time.

Sir Ken Robinson (2011) further supported the value of the arts in a high school setting. He proposed that creativity is now as important in education as literacy and argued that institutions of higher education need to look closely at their educational objectives, teaching strategies, and physical environments if they hope to graduate future leaders who can think increasingly outside the box. There is a place for the arts in schools and as educators we need to recognize the value of the arts and ensure students

have opportunities to explore their creativity in school.

I would argue that courses such as dance positively affect students' experiences in high school. Throughout my teaching, I have observed that when students perform poorly and struggle academically their self-confidence often drops and they may disengage from learning. On the other hand, when students are successful, their self-confidence increases and school becomes more enjoyable, which improves student engagement. If students have classes that they look forward to in their day they are likely to develop positive relationships with teachers and other students, attend classes regularly, and engage actively in their classes.

Research Design

This research explored the experiences of six post-graduate high school students who were involved in the Dance Academy program in a large urban high school, Prairie Collegiate, from 2006-2012 to understand how their experiences in a high school dance program impacted their student engagement. Participants selected to participate in this research project had to have completed four years in the Dance Academy program so that they were exposed to all grade levels and had a variety of experiences on which to reflect. In order to learn different perspectives, students selected for the research came into the dance program with no dance experience, little experience, or extensive studio training.

For this research the specific questions were:

1. What were the learning experiences of six high school students who participated in one dance program over a four-year period?
2. Did these experiences contribute to increased student engagement?

Chapter 2: Literature Review

“While I dance I can not judge, I can not hate, I can not separate myself from life. I can only be joyful and whole. This is why I dance” ~ Hans Bos

Academic High School Experiences

High school is an important time in the development of adolescents both socially and academically (Eccles, Midgley, Wigfield, Buchanan, Reuman, Flanagan, & MacIver, 1993). When students enroll in high school, many of them look forward to new opportunities and experiences. There are a wide variety of classes, more musical and performance opportunities, higher teacher expertise in subject areas, social events, travel opportunities through integrated learning just to name a few. Unfortunately, many students are not able to experience the wide variety of subject areas high schools have to offer. Ornstein (2003) commented:

Demands for educational excellence and academic productivity have resulted in an emphasis on cognition, not humanism, and on subjects such as science and math, rather than art and music ... Education must focus on both the personal and interpersonal. This could require overcoming a long tradition of regarding cognition as something separate from feeling. To be sure, the student's self concept, self esteem, and personal learning are essential factors in learning, which involves social and moral, not just cognitive aspects. (p. 9)

“Arts electives are being replaced by computer science, more math, more English, more history, exactly what economic interests dictate” (Fowler, 1996, p. 9). For many students, the arts allow opportunities for exploration of courses they may never have experienced before. These opportunities can provide students with an outlet for self-

expression. For many students these classes can offer stress relief from the pressures of the mandatory core classes (Cook, 2005). Many students use these classes to improve their overall average and it gives them a learning experience to look forward to.

Unfortunately, in many cases we are removing optional classes, especially the arts, from the programs of students who may only find success in those specialized areas.

In some cases, students who struggle in math and English are removed from elective classes such as dance, art, and drama to be put into a resource class to support those academic classes (Smith, 2009). In my experience, schools remove students from these elective classes because these classes are not mandatory for graduation. In 2003, Minton conducted a study, *Assessment of high school students' creative thinking skills: A comparison of dance and non-dance classes*, and found that students involved in the arts programs maintained gains in creativity, and in some aspects of mathematics, and reading achievement. Minton also found that students exposed to the arts were more expressive, imaginative, cooperative, and more willing to take risks. Students need opportunities throughout the day to be successful, have fun, and be creative while learning. Dance classes and other arts programs offer students many opportunities that could benefit students as they enter the world and give them tools to manage their day-to-day lives (Smith, 2009).

Research also demonstrated that the arts increase students' academic ability in other areas of study (Eisner, 2010). A case study conducted in the United Kingdom reported that students participating in the arts experienced relief from tension, developmental creativity, improved thinking skills, and enriched self-confidence (Harland, Kinder, Lord, Stott, Schagen, Haynes, Cusworth, White, & Paola, 2000).

Allowing students an opportunity in the day to dance, be creative, and engage in playing or listening to music could give them the break they need so that they can regroup and focus more productively in their other academic classes.

Examining the research on the benefits of dance in high school it seems logical to ensure that students' are afforded the opportunity to experience classes such as dance. The research conducted by Minton (2003) and Harland et al. (2000) point out many benefits dance has on students education such as improved math and reading achievement, improved thinking skills, gains in creativity, and enriched self-confidence. It seems apparent that studying dance can make a vast impact on other areas of study and enrich students' high school experiences.

Collegiate Renewal

The Prairie School Division, in which Prairie Collegiate is a part, realized that it needed to raise test scores and increase student engagement. One of the Prairie School Division's strategic learning priorities is Collegiate Renewal. Prairie School Division documents stated, "Collegiate renewal will transform our high schools and the learning our students receive" (Collegiate Renewal, 2007). Prairie School Division felt too many students were showing signs of disengagement from their learning and not graduating from school. A principal in the division, Mr. Smith, reported that as a result of Collegiate Renewal, "We have seen an increase in program development and teacher creativity all with the goal of connecting students to their learning" (Personal Communication, February 16, 2013).

One example of Collegiate Renewal was the Dance Academy program offered at Prairie Collegiate. Providing specialized programs such as the Dance Academy offers

students opportunities to be active and learn in creative ways. The Collegiate Renewal outcome statement reads, "All collegiate students will be engaged in their learning so that they will graduate as active participants in lifelong learning and as responsible and caring citizens in the community, nation and world" (Collegiate Renewal, 2007). Engaging our students in their learning is vital to their success in high school. Mr. Smith was the first Vice-Principal at Prairie Collegiate and was instrumental in bringing the Dance Academy into the school. He shared his thoughts:

The main purpose of the Dance Academy was to create an environment that would encourage students to come to this top notch teaching and learning facility. We believe it has made a difference, but the key is having the right teacher teaching these programs. The word Academy has the ability to heighten expectations, and that is why we attached it to the Dance and Soccer programs. The Dance and Soccer Academies have been terrific magnets for our school. When you look at the numbers enrolled in these programs, they are far and away the highest in the city. We had great leadership at the start of these programs and they now sell themselves. Academies help students feel a sense of pride in the program, understand what high expectations mean, and see the commitment and dedication over four years.

(Personal Communication, February 16, 2013)

As a result of the Collegiate Renewal initiative, there was an increased curricula base offered at Prairie Collegiate and positive attention was focused towards providing students learning opportunities through the Dance program. This attention provided teachers who had expertise in this area, the opportunity to respond to curricular outcomes in dance, and provide quality-learning experiences in dance to students to further their

education through another context. Dance became a more valued piece of the curriculum at Prairie Collegiate and students were eager to explore these opportunities dance afforded.

Dance Experiences at the High School Level

High school students do better if they are engaged in school and if they make meaningful relationships with staff and students (Libbey, 2004). If educators want our youth to be confident and develop a positive sense of self, dance is a class where students can use their imagination and express themselves creatively. Cook (2005) stated:

This dance classroom is a place where all students can be successful, for within the confines of this space, a broad spectrum of learning preferences are addressed and multiple intelligences are acknowledged and validated. Divergent learners, in particular, regard the dance class often as the only safe haven in an institution that, by middle school, they have come to dislike intensely. (p. 28)

Dance can offer students an opportunity to be out of their desks, be physically active, and express themselves artistically. Studies suggest that instructional methods used when teaching in the arts are effective with students who do not perform well in the traditional classroom (Cook, 2005; Harland et al., 2000). Arts-based classes encourage students to express themselves in a way that best works for them. Through experimentation, students not only learn from themselves but they learn from their peers as well.

Dance has been described as “an exciting and vibrant art, which can be used in the educational setting to assist the growth of the student and to unify the physical, mental, and emotional aspects of the human being” (Dance Directions, 1988, p. 32). In today’s

society, many students are under pressure to achieve high marks to attend post secondary education (Furger, 2008). If high school students had more opportunities to take classes such as dance, it could serve as a stress reliever and provide students with an opportunity to develop physically, mentally, and emotionally. In research conducted by Carter (2004) on the effects of formal dance training on student performance, perceived wellness, and self-concept in high school students, she stated, “Dance education’s major contribution to a person’s well being is the mind-body interaction, benefitting the individual emotionally, cognitively, and physically” (p. 20).

Hanna (1997) wrote a compelling argument for making dance a part of every student’s education. She stated, “Some studies show a positive association between students being educated in dance and academic achievement and other measures of school success” (p. 36). In 1990, Brooks-Schmitz examined the impact of a dance education program on the motivation, academic performance, and personal development of inner-city youth. In this study, students in the program demonstrated an increased sense of capability, achievement and empowerment; higher test scores; improved attendance; acquired self-discipline; mature behavior; and a sense of responsibility and caring for others. Schnitt and Schnitt (1988) found “students taking dance classes not only felt better about themselves over a similar group who took an academic course, they also felt better about themselves than students who participated in active sports” (p. 241).

This body of literature identifies the many benefits of incorporating a dance program within the high school curriculum. Research shows that dance increases overall achievement, test scores, and attendance rates. Dance has been linked to empowering students to use their imagination, creating opportunities for them to express themselves

through another venue. Students who dance build strong relationships, self concept and self-discipline which in turn sets them up to be more successful in school.

Student Engagement

With falling test scores and increasing rates of high school dropouts across Canada, it is evident that schools need to engage students to keep them in the classrooms (Furger, 2008). “Years of research have proven that schools can have a powerful impact on student engagement and student achievement” (Willms, Friesen, & Milton, 2009, p. 5). Klem & Connell (2004) affirm “studies show students become more disengaged from school as they progress from elementary to middle school to high school. By high school as many as 40% to 60% of students become chronically disengaged from school” (p. 262). Educators need to recognize these statistics, and search to understand the reasons behind student disengagement, and work towards reversing this data.

Student engagement occurs when students are motivated and invested in their learning (Barkley, 2009). Research shows that when students are engaged, they are more successful, receive higher grades and perform better in tests (Appleton et al., 2008). Engaged students have lower drop out rates and attend school regularly (Appleton et al.) As educators, we know how important it is to ensure our students are engaged but how can we achieve this and what does student engagement look like?

Picture a classroom where students are paying attention, listening, asking and responding to questions, and actively participating. These students are engaged in their learning. Johnson (2012) says the solution to creating student engagement is simple. If a teacher wants to increase student engagement, then the teacher needs to increase student activity. Johnson argues that in order to engage students in school you need to put them

in charge of their learning (2012). Certain courses lend themselves towards students being more actively engaged in the classroom. The arts, and specifically dance, are excellent examples of courses students can take that can further engage them in their education. Dance allows students to be active and take charge in student learning which increases student engagement (Johnson, 2012). Classes such as dance provide engaging learning environments for students who may lack interest in other classes (Cooke, 2005). Research evidence indicates that there are significant benefits to the study of curricula in the arts to promote student engagement (Minton, 2003; Cooke, 2005; Klem & Connell, 2004).

Student engagement is important to student learning. Klem and Connell (2004) affirm “research links higher levels of engagement in school with improved performance” (p. 262). McGaw, Piper and Banks (1992) suggested that:

School effectiveness is about a great deal more than maximizing academic achievement. Learning and the love of learning; personal development and self esteem; life skills, problem solving and learning how to learn; the development of independent thinkers and well-rounded confident individuals; all rank as highly or more highly as the outcomes of effective schooling as success in a narrow range of academic disciplines. (p. 174)

Students who are engaged typically demonstrate improved grades, a sense of belonging, stronger skills, and an improved self-perception. In the report, *What did you do in school today* (Willms et al., 2009), student engagement is defined as “the extent to which students identify with and value schooling outcomes, have a sense of belonging at

school, participate in academic and non-academic activities, strive to meet the formal requirements of schooling, and make a serious investment in learning” (p. 6).

The report further described three dimensions of student engagement as social engagement, academic engagement, and intellectual engagement. Social engagement is “a sense of belonging and participation in school life” (Willms et al., 2009, p. 6) which may include the students’ participation in sports and school clubs, while academic engagement is described as the “participation in the formal requirements of schooling” (p. 7). Students who are academically engaged in school demonstrate motivation to do well, attend classes regularly, and participate actively in class. The third dimension of student engagement, intellectual engagement, is defined as “a serious emotional and cognitive investment in learning, using higher order thinking skills (such as analysis and evaluation) to increase understanding, solve complex problems, or construct new knowledge” (p. 7). Students who are intellectually engaged feel challenged, have high expectations of success, and have positive relationships with teachers.

Canadian students have very low levels of engagement (Willms, 2003). Research stated that “levels of participation and academic engagement fall steadily from Grade 6 to Grade 12, while intellectual engagement falls during middle school years and remains at a low level throughout secondary school” (Willms et al., 2009, p. 17). Appleton et al. (2008) affirm:

The importance of student engagement with school is recognized by educators, as is the observation that far too many students are bored, unmotivated, and uninvolved, that is, disengaged from the academic and social aspects of school life. (p. 369)

Teachers today need to find ways to create engaging classrooms so that schools can increase student engagement and ensure students are motivated and excited to learn.

The Impact of Dance on Student Relationships and Engagement

Research indicates that studying or participating in dance can have a positive impact on student learning in regards to the relationships that students build with both fellow students and teachers (Libbey, 2004). Research also shows that taking dance in high school increases student engagement (Carter, 2004; Cook, 2005). Gentry, Steenbergen and Choi (2012) described classroom communities where students experienced both safety and a sense of belonging as being important to engaging students at school. In order to be engaged in their learning, students need a place where teachers developed rapport, respect, and trust with their students (Gentry et al., 2012). Their research found that establishing relationships with students encouraged them to want to learn and this motivated them to try harder. Classes such as dance and other arts encouraged these relationships to develop since students worked closely with their teacher and relied heavily on feedback in order to improve their skills.

In the studio, dancers learn to develop trusting relationships. Students rely on the teachers to provide them with feedback and encouragement to improve their dance skills. Establishing relationships with students is extremely important in building trust, especially in a dance class where student assessment can be subjective. Gentry et al. (2012) found that teachers who take a personal interest in their students “set high expectations for themselves and their students, make learning meaningful and relevant and teachers who have a clear passion for their students, teaching, and for their content

are rated exemplary by students enrolled in their classes” (p. 116). These qualities in teachers engage students in the class and foster genuine and trusting relationships.

Relationships between teachers and students are very important to student engagement. Klem & Connell (2004) stated, “Students who perceive teachers as creating a caring, well-structured learning environment in which expectations are high, clear, and fair are more likely to report engagement in school” (p. 270). As a result, high levels of engagement are associated with higher attendance and achievement (Klem & Connell, 2004). The Prairie School Division Administration, in which Prairie Collegiate is a part, felt too many students were showing signs of disengagement from their learning and not graduating from school. Offering programs such as dance offers students a course in which they can connect with a teacher and develop meaningful relationships to increase their overall engagement in school.

Benefits of Dance for Students Physical Fitness

A dance program creates an active environment. Research studies show that more than half of Canadian children and youth are not active enough to achieve optimal growth and development (Health Canada, 2011). Providing students with opportunities throughout the day to be physically active can help increase activity levels in our youth. The current recommendation is to have students active for 60 minutes a day and by offering classes like dance, students could achieve this during school hours (Health Canada, 2011). Offering students the opportunity to be active and improve their overall physical fitness can also improve students’ self-confidence.

In the past, dance was incorporated only in physical education. Currently dance is recognized as an art form comparable to visual art, music, and drama and now schools

are implementing dance classes into various high schools. In Saskatoon alone, the Saskatoon Public School Division offers dance programs in Grade 9 for every student and dance programs from grades 9-12 in four high schools. Carter (2004) stated, “Dance offers a different and intriguing look at how children and adolescents learn, in addition to how they dance. How children dance may reflect and inform how they learn other skills and understand the world around them” (p. 9).

Currently all students in Grades 9 and 10 are required to take physical education but in Grades 11 and 12 it is not mandatory. Unfortunately, many girls do not enjoy physical education (Chorney & Weitz, 2009) and therefore do not work as hard as they could to get the maximum benefits. Dance provides a unique opportunity to reach students and is a change from the all too common sports paradigm in physical education. Many female students like to dance so this is an opportunity to create activity within their school day and at the same time offer a class that students would like to participate in. Dancing develops a wide range of gross and fine motor skills while promoting overall physical fitness. Dancing improves coordination, flexibility, balance, agility, strength, and stamina. It is a form of physical activity that individuals can enjoy throughout life, allowing for a wide range of abilities (Holland, 2013).

Identifying Student Intelligences – Meeting the Needs of Students

Gardner’s theory (1993) of multiple intelligences assists educators in realizing that students learn in different ways and that approaches to pedagogy must reflect this awareness. As educators, we need to be aware of our students’ strengths and areas of interests and their preference towards learning. Howard Gardner has outlined eight different kinds of intelligence in *Frames of Mind* (1993). Students who have strengths

with words, demonstrate strength with *linguistics*; students who excel in mathematics fit into the *logical-mathematical* intelligence; musicians, composers and dancers who show a heightened musical intelligence fit into the *musical* intelligence; students who are visual learners are *spatially* intelligent; the *bodily-kinesthetic* intelligence describe those who have the ability to use one's body in a skilled way, for self-expression or toward a goal; *interpersonal* intelligence describes those students who have an ability to perceive and understand other individuals -- their moods, desires, and motivations; *intrapersonal* intelligence is an understanding of one's own emotions; Gardner's eighth intelligence, the *naturalist* intelligence, describes those who have the ability to recognize and classify plants, minerals, and animals.

In examining Gardner's multiple intelligences, it is clear that within our classrooms, students bring many different types of intelligences. Gardner's research suggests that every student possesses the different areas of intelligences, but depending on each student's cultural environment and biological make-up, certain areas will be stronger than others. It is essential that all educators recognize the multiple intelligences within the learning environment to allow all students opportunities to express themselves through their areas of intelligence. Schools can do this by offering a variety of classes that will provide students an opportunity to be successful. Students engaged in the study of dance have the opportunity to engage in several of these intelligences.

Summary

High school is a very important time in the development of our youth. It is important to recognize ways to create happy, healthy, and life-long learners. Students are under tremendous pressure to obtain good marks and to take all math and science courses

offered so they are prepared for the future. The emphasis on these subjects, along with tight student academic timetables and perceived value in educational subjects leaves fewer opportunities for students to pursue learning in areas such as arts education.

Dance is an art form that brings joy and happiness to many students. It allows students to be creative and physically active at the same time. Dance classes provide students with opportunities to build strong relationships and can affect their learning in all areas of study. If students are given an opportunity to do something they enjoy, they become engaged in the activity and it can make learning more meaningful. Student engagement is a key to students' overall success in school.

Educators must realize the value in all learning and must strive to provide more equitable invitations to curriculum for our students. Valuing learning and the potential for student engagement through arts education has led to this research inquiry.

Chapter 3: Methodology

“I see dance being used as communication between body and soul, to express what is too deep to find for words” ~ Ruth St. Denis

Qualitative Research

Qualitative research was used to examine and describe the participants’ experiences in one high school dance program and the impact of these experiences on student engagement. One purpose of qualitative research is to develop an understanding of how individuals come to understand, or find meaning, in their lived experience. Qualitative researchers are interested in understanding what the interpretations are at a particular point in time and in a particular context. “Learning how individuals experience and interact with the social world, the meaning it has for them, is considered an interpretive qualitative approach” (Merriam, 2002, p. 4). The product of qualitative research is richly descriptive using words and pictures rather than numbers (Merriam, 2002). Qualitative research was used to analyze the experiences of post-graduate high school students who participated in the Dance Academy program.

Qualitative research is an inquiry process of understanding based on a distinct methodological tradition of inquiry that explores a social or human problem. The researcher builds a complex, holistic picture, analyzes words, reports detailed views of informants, and conducts the study in a natural setting. (Creswell, 2007, p. 249)

Merriam (2002) stated that the “key to understanding qualitative research lies with the idea that meaning is socially constructed by individuals interactions with their world” (p. 3). Qualitative data aims to produce descriptive data, examining meanings,

themes and patterns (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). Merriam (2002) described qualitative research methods as being inductive, meaning that researchers attempt to build concepts and gain insight into the study, rather than testing a hypothesis. Qualitative research is unique because of the active role of the researcher. The researcher must “expand his or her understanding through nonverbal as well as verbal communication, process information (data) immediately, clarify and summarize material, check with respondents for accuracy or interpretation, and explore unusual or unanticipated responses” (Merriam, 2002, p. 5).

This study examined and described six participants’ experiences in a high school dance program and the impact of these experiences on student engagement.

The Participants

Purposeful sampling was used to select six postgraduate high school students’ for participation in this study. Merriam (1998) stated that purposeful sampling is an appropriate sampling strategy in qualitative research and is “based on the assumption that the investigator wants to discover, understand, and gain insight and therefore must select a sample from which most can be learned” (p. 61).

To ensure that the sample of students was purposeful, the researcher selected students who had completed four years in the Dance Academy program at Prairie Collegiate. These students would potentially provide the most in-depth experiences due to the length of time they spent within the program. Merriam (2009) explains this sample of high school graduates would “involve identifying and seeking out those who represent the widest possible range of the characteristics of interest for the study” (p. 79). The six students were intentionally selected with different levels of dance experience to ensure a

representation of the cross section of students who participated in the dance program.

Two students had extensive dance studio training, one had little experience, and three had no prior dance training. Not only did participants have varying levels of training, they also had many different interests. The students who participated in this study participated in a range of extra curricular activities such as band, jazz band, choir, musicals, variety night, one act plays, art club, pom squad, volunteer club, Student Leadership Club, History Study Tour, Synchrotron Club, wrestling, volleyball, football, rugby, and soccer.

Since 2006, hundreds of students have participated in the dance program at Prairie Collegiate. In conducting a qualitative research study, it was important that participants were carefully selected to ensure accurate and reliable data. Six to eight participants often provide adequate data to formulate themes generated through data collection (Mason, 2010).

All former students of the dance program, both male and female, were invited to participate in the study through a letter of invitation sent via e-mail (Appendix B). Students were contacted, inviting them to share their knowledge and experience of the dance program at Prairie Collegiate. The letter outlined the purpose of the project and explained that their participation was requested and voluntary. Each participant was informed that their identity would be kept confidential by the researcher through the use of pseudonyms chosen by the students. The relationship between the participants and the researcher was a post teacher/student relationship. The researcher was not currently teaching any of these students as they had all graduated from high school.

The Researcher

“The researcher is the primary instrument of data collection and analysis” (Merriam, 2002, p. 179) in qualitative research studies. Teaching the Dance Academy program sparked my interest in examining the impact dance has on high school students engagement. As a former teacher at Prairie Collegiate, I had a strong background and interest in dance. I used my professional experiences, as the former Dance Academy teacher, to create the research questions and seek understanding about student engagement within the Dance Academy program. This qualitative research study was a search of meaning and understanding (Merriam, 2009) that the Dance Academy had on student engagement for those involved in the program at Prairie Collegiate.

The participants, role of former students of the researcher, helped them to be comfortable participating in this study due to a past association and established relationship. These relationships made conducting the individual interviews, follow up interviews, and the group interview comfortable since there was a trust established between the researcher and participants.

Data Collection

This qualitative research project used semi-structured interviews as an instrument of data collection (Appendix A). Bogdan and Biklen (2003) defined semi-structured interviews as “interviews in which the same general questions and topics are brought up to each of the subjects involved” (p. 261). Prior to conducting the semi-structured interviews, the researcher piloted the questions with four post high school students to ensure clarity of the questions. These students were not associated with the research in any way other than the pilot. As a result of the pilot three questions were rewritten for

clarity. The data was not used in the analysis, but it tested the process and the questions to ensure that the questions invited a collection of meaningful and descriptive data.

The interviews were audiotaped and were approximately one hour in length. Each participant was interviewed twice individually, and once during a three hour group interview. The interview format was comprised of open-ended questions that solicited the students' opinions about their Dance Academy experiences. Merriam (2009) describes good interview questions as open-ended questions because they yield meaningful and descriptive data. In this study the questions asked the participants to describe their experiences, opinions, feelings and knowledge about the Dance Academy program at Prairie Collegiate. After each of the initial interviews was conducted, follow-up questions were asked to further uncover their experiences in the Dance Academy.

All interviews were recorded and later transcribed. "This practice ensures that everything said is preserved for analysis" (Merriam, 2009, p. 109). The participants were provided the transcripts from their interviews to ensure validity and accuracy of their statements. Participants were given an opportunity to change, add, or alter any of their quotes before signing the data release form. Finalized transcripts from the first interview were reviewed to identify themes and to create discussion questions for the following interviews.

The participants were provided several options for the location of the interviews such as restaurants, libraries, conference rooms, or the researcher's home. The participants choose the researcher's home due to the convenient location and they felt they would feel most comfortable there. The interviews were scheduled at the

participants' availability. To further develop a comfort level, the researcher provided snacks and time was spent re-connecting with students and catching up on their lives.

The interview process was explained to the participants before beginning. They were informed that at any time they could stop the interview, re-answer or add to questions, or ask for clarification.

The specific focus of this study was to investigate the impact of a high school dance curriculum on student engagement and the interview questions were designed to solicit in-depth descriptions of experiences (see Appendix A). Subsequent questions for further interviews emerged from the initial interviews. Once all of the participants were interviewed individually, a second interview took place. Subsequent questions for this interview were formulated as a result of the previous interviews and dialogue that occurred. Information gathered throughout this process was then used to create open-ended questions for the focus group interview.

To identify themes that emerged from the interviews, the researcher kept a personal journal to record specifics from each interview:

Keeping and using reflective research journals can make the messiness of the research process visible to the researcher who can then make it visible for those who read the research and thus avoid producing, reproducing, and circulating the discourse of research as a neat and linear process. (Ortlipp, 2008)

In the journal, key points and findings from each interview were organized to create meaningful questions to ask each participant at their follow-up interview and with the group interview. Journaling also provided the researcher with the opportunity to reflect on each of the interviews conducted. The journal was used to derive future interview

questions and create themes from the data.

In the second individual interview, questions continued to focus on student engagement in school and the dance program. The participants were provided with the definition of student engagement that was being used for this research project. Each of the participants were told that for the purpose of this research project student engagement is defined as: Occurring when students are invested in their learning (Barkley, 2009; Carini, Kuh, & Klein, 2006). “Student engagement is the product of motivation and active learning. It is a product rather than a sum because it will not occur if either element is missing” (Barkley, 2009, p. 10). As educators we know the importance of engagement and student learning (Taylor, & Parsons, 2011). Student engagement has been linked to student success (Carini, Kuh & Klein, 2006). Prior to conducting the second interview great care was taken to ensure the participants understood what the definition of student engagement meant for the purpose of this research project.

After two individual interviews with each participant, a group interview was conducted with all participants. The group interview served as a focus group to capitalize on the communication between research participants in order to generate rich data. The focus group used group interaction as part of the method (Merriam, 2009). Focus groups can provide valuable data because instead of the researcher asking each person individually to respond to a question, the students were encouraged to talk to one another, asking questions, exchanging anecdotes and commenting on each others' experiences and point-of-view (Kitzinger, 1995). Conducting the focus group interview was particularly useful for exploring the students' experiences and examined not only what they think, but also how they think, and why they think that way.

In the focus group, rich data was gathered through the conversations and discussions that emerged in the group setting. Many stories and memories were sparked as the participants recalled their experiences in the dance program at Prairie Collegiate. The group interview lasted three hours and during this time the students were able to answer the main questions while expanding on each other's thoughts and experiences. Together the participants were able to recall other thoughts and ideas through the experiences they shared with each other.

Data Analysis

According to Creswell (2007), in order to analyze data in a qualitative study the researcher must prepare and organize the data, reduce the data into a manageable set of themes, and represent the data in figures, tables, or discussions. Merriam (2009) describes the preferred way to analyze data in a qualitative study as to do it simultaneously with the data collection. She stated, "Without ongoing analysis, the data can be unfocused, repetitious, and overwhelming in the sheer volume of material that needs to be processed" (p. 171). For this qualitative project, data from the interviews with post-graduate students from the Dance Academy program were studied following each interview. Key statements were examined and the data "provided an understanding of how the participants experienced the phenomenon" (Creswell, 2007, p. 61).

After each interview, time was spent transcribing and coding the transcripts. Coding is "assigning some sort of short-hand designation to various aspects of your data" (Merriam, 2009, p. 173). In this qualitative study the transcripts were coded with letters that represented repetitive themes that emerged from the interviews. Codes used in this qualitative study were, SE – student engagement, C – confidence, R – relationships, and

S – sense of belonging to list a few. The transcripts were read looking for words and phrases that shed light on each student's experiences in the dance program. The data was studied and notes and comments were made about each interview looking for specific themes, and the similarities and differences between all the interviews conducted. The study focused on the postgraduate high school dance students and conveyed the impact of one high school dance curriculum on six students' engagement.

Limitations of the Study

One limitation to this study may be sample size. A larger sample would have provided a broader picture of the experiences of the dancers who took part in the Dance Academy program at Prairie Collegiate. This study represents the experiences of six students from one Dance Academy Program in an urban city under the direction of one teacher. However, Merriam (2002, 2009) pointed out that these participants' views and experiences are what the study is about and should be respected as important data contributing to the research question. Interviewing students from a variety of schools both urban and rural, who took part in a dance program would provide a more comprehensive look at the experiences of high school students in a Dance Academy program. The results are not generalizable and are impacted by a variety of factors within this one program including the facility, the teacher, students, pedagogies applied within class, and curriculum.

Careful consideration and thought were put into eliminating bias by the researcher. Participants were encouraged to be open and honest with their responses. During the interviews the participants were asked to paint a clear picture of their experiences in the Dance Academy program at Prairie Collegiate. They were asked to

share positive and negative experiences and they were ensured that negative responses would not hurt my feelings. Questions looked for negative aspects of the Dance Academy and students were prompted to share negative aspects but their data was very positive. Every effort was made to make sure the participants were open and honest about their responses and that as a researcher the data collection and research accurately articulated the students' experiences in the Dance Academy at Prairie Collegiate.

Ethical Considerations

This study followed the research protocol approved by the University of Saskatchewan Behavioral Research Ethics (see Appendix D). To protect the confidentiality of the research participants, this study used pseudonyms to protect their identity. The purpose and procedures of the study were fully disclosed and informed consent was obtained (Appendices B and C). Although anonymity could not be guaranteed, participants were encouraged to demonstrate confidentiality and respect for other participants in the focus group interview.

For this study, qualitative research was used to examine and describe the participants' experiences in the Dance Academy program in relation to student engagement. Care was taken to ensure participants selected would provide in-depth description of their experiences. Data was collected and examined and participants were provided copies to ensure validity and accuracy. At all times ethical guidelines were respected in conducting this qualitative research study.

Chapter 4: Data Analysis and Results

***“I don't want people who want to dance, I want people who have to dance. ”
~ George Balanchine***

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of a high school dance program on student engagement. Personal teaching experiences and observations of students while teaching in the Dance Academy were the impetus for this research to determine if the students' experiences in a four-year dance program influenced student engagement. In this chapter, the results from the research are discussed.

The Dance Academy program was introduced to Prairie School Division in 2006 as one of the School Division's priorities, known as Collegiate Renewal. After six years of this program, this was the first study conducted to investigate post-graduate students' experiences and student engagement within the program. It was of interest to learn whether or not these specialized programs made a difference in students' experiences and if student engagement was impacted as a result of the Dance program at Prairie Collegiate.

The Participants

There were six participants in this qualitative research project. For the purpose of this research the participants chose pseudonyms to protect their identity. The sample consisted of Elizabeth and Jordan, two students with extensive studio training. They both had competed in dance competitions, attended workshops, and had studied a variety of dance styles such as tap, jazz, lyrical, ballet and hip-hop. Elizabeth came into high school weak academically and very fearful that she would not fit in at Prairie Collegiate. Elizabeth did not believe in herself and was very shy and quiet in the first year of high school but quickly opened up in the Dance Academy once she realized she was looked up

to as a strong dancer in the class. Throughout her high school years Elizabeth blossomed into a confident, outgoing young girl, and was considered a leader in the dance class and on the pom team.

Jordan came into Grade 9 quiet but confident. She was a talented dancer who worked hard in class and to whom others looked up. By Grade 10, Jordan was choreographing dances and teaching her classmates. She was a leader in class and a captain on the pom team in Grade 12. Both Elizabeth and Jordan were in the Grade 9 advanced dance class with other students who had previous dance training.

Tiffany was a student who had little dance training prior to high school. She had taken some community dance classes but studied gymnastics at a high level. Although she was not as strong as Elizabeth and Jordan at dance, she practiced very hard and improved her dance skills very quickly. Tiffany was quiet and reserved in Grade 9 but, as her confidence improved, she became a leader in the class. Tiffany was also in the Grade 9 advanced dance class.

Michael was one of the only boys in the Dance Academy. He came into the dance program with no dance experience. Michael was extremely shy and very nervous around the girls. He worked very hard in class and was involved in the dance productions and musical productions over his four years at Prairie Collegiate. He also became involved in a hip-hop dance crew that practiced at lunch and after school.

Finally, Sarah and Rachel were two students who also entered the dance program at Prairie Collegiate with no prior dance training. Both Sarah and Rachel were very shy and hardly talked in Grade 9. They both worked hard in class but danced with no emotion. At times it was hard to know if they really enjoyed what we were working on in

class. In Grade 9, both Sarah and Rachel were in the beginner Grade 9 dance class. In Grade 10 a transformation occurred for both Sarah and Rachel. Both girls were more confident and outgoing in dance. They were still quiet but they started to demonstrate a love for dance. Both girls worked hard, practiced, and quickly became the stronger dancers in class. All six of these students were four-year members of the Dance Academy throughout their high school years.

Emergent Themes

Four main themes emerged from this study of the participants' experiences in the Dance Academy. The participants indicated, as a result of their participation within the Dance Academy, an increase in 1) self-confidence, 2) healthy relationships amongst their peers and with their teacher, 3) a sense of belonging, and 4) feelings of self-worth. These themes are discussed below. While they stand individually as emergent themes, there is an intersection between the themes that all relate back to student engagement.

Self-Confidence

The first common theme that emerged from the students' experiences centered around the development of a stronger sense of self-confidence as a result of their participation within the Dance program. Research conducted by Harland et al. (2000) supported that classes such as dance enrich students' self-confidence. In the first interview the participants shared what they learned about themselves through the Dance Academy at Prairie Collegiate.

Elizabeth shared that she believed in herself more and gained confidence through the dance program. "I believed that I could accomplish anything I set my mind up to do.... I never believed in myself enough to actually be a leader until I belonged to this

dance program” (Individual Conversation, Dec. 12, 2012). Tiffany also said she gained confidence through the Dance Academy program:

When I was in classes before I was very shy and reserved and wouldn’t say stuff until I was spoken to. But as the years went on and in grade 12 especially I became more of a leader and I just felt a lot more comfortable and a lot more confident in sharing my opinions and that (Individual Conversation, Dec. 12, 2012).

For students like Tiffany, the Dance Academy gave her confidence through practicing and performing in front of audiences, seeing her growth with her dance skills, and working in groups. Elizabeth shared that the confidence she gained from the Dance Academy helped her in her post-high school graduate work. She stated:

I do want to thank the Academy for boosting my confidence, teaching me skills and giving me a sense of belonging. I have moved forward with independence and graduated with honors from SIAST and I have just been employed into the work force. I am not sure I would be where I am today if it wasn’t for the Dance Academy family, the coach, and teachers and their total faith in my success (Individual Conversation, January 4, 2013).

All participants offered insight into how their dance experiences within the program increased their self-confidence. There were positive by products of dancing that included performing, building comfort levels, expanding friendships, and feeling more confident in front of others. As a result of these positive outcomes the participants transferred these improved characteristics to other classes and work that they were called to do. Tiffany said:

Through performing, it helped increase my confidence. I got a lot more comfortable performing in front of the audiences and even in the dance classes...By the time Grade 12 rolled around, I was expanding my friendship bases and talking to people I wouldn't normally talk within my classes and...speaking up in class (Individual Conversation, Dec. 14, 2012).

Jordan shared:

Performing more got rid of the stage fright.... I think it helped with making presentations in other classes because I felt more confident and I ended up loving presenting. By Grade 12, doing presentations was one of my favorite things in classes and I could do it well and speak well and not worry or be scared (Individual Conversation, Dec. 6, 2012).

Michael stated that he was very shy and over the years in the dance program he became less shy and even started talking to the girls in class. Michael also shared, "Dance helped more timid students such as myself be more comfortable with expressing my opinion, participating in group discussions and presenting (Individual Conversation, Dec. 28, 2012)." Rachel said:

Dance pushed me to do things I would never have done. Performing on stage as part of a group, then as part of a trio, and finally as a solo by the end of Grade 12. It happened as slow steps, but I would never have had that ending confidence at the beginning without the Dance Academy (Individual Conversation, Nov. 24, 2012).

Since the participants shared they gained confidence through the Dance Academy program, in their follow-up interview and during the group interview, the participants

were asked to share more of their experiences and details to explain why the Dance Academy increased their confidence. Tiffany, Jordan, Rachel and Elizabeth said their increased confidence gave them the ability to take on leadership roles throughout their senior years of high school. In the second interview, they were asked to explain if they believed they would have found this confidence through other curricular classes. Tiffany said, “I definitely think that dance enhanced my high school experience and made it better.... Having dance in my life made my confidence grow, and it made it easier to try all the new things that high school offers. No other classes pushed me out of my comfort zone and made me believe that I could perform” (Individual Conversation, January 5, 2013). Elizabeth stated that she would not have found this confidence through other curricular classes.

In my classes I have always been the quiet one, but in dance I could express my true self and no one would judge me. In other classes you could take notes and leave. I would have never even got a chance to realize I could take on a leadership role! I was never as confident with my academic skills as I was with my dance skills therefore this gave me a boost to realize that I can be good at something (Individual Conversation, January 4, 2013).

Rachel provided insight into the confidence that she gained through dance:

I am not sure if I would have found the same confidence in other classes. To be honest I always had a lot of confidence in my abilities in other classes, but I was lacking in the confidence when it came to being in front of other people. I was always concerned about what other people thought of me. I do not think I would have found the same confidence in other classes simply because I would not have

been challenged to change or try new things (Individual Conversation, January 2, 2013).

Sarah shared:

I don't think I would have found this confidence through other classes. The Dance Academy provided the opportunity for me to open up and be outgoing in ways other classes didn't allow. Dance was something I picked up pretty easy and saw improvement, which made me more confident. I got very good marks in dance and I always received encouragement from my teacher and peers. I learned so much about leadership through dance and was able to use my leadership both in the classroom and in pom (Individual Conversation, January 5, 2013).

In the group interview, the participants were asked how dance impacted their confidence throughout their high school years. Sarah shared, "I improved in dance class and that gave me confidence. Dance was where I was successful and where I was the most outgoing. The Dance Academy was what I got known for, and that's where I found my identity" (Group Interview, Jan. 29, 2013). Rachel came into dance with no experience and never expected to be a star dancer. She stated:

Performing at recitals, pep rallies and sporting events definitely helped with my confidence and it helped me see that I was naturally good at something. There was never anything physical that I was good at before so the Dance Academy was definitely a confidence booster (Group Interview, Jan. 29, 2013).

Elizabeth added:

I think dance definitely gave me a sense of confidence and I think it correlates with something that made me happy. When you're doing something you love and

doing something that makes you happy you gain more confidence. Dance gave me confidence that I could take it to other areas of my life like public speaking. It opened a whole other door I didn't know could be opened, I guess, so to speak. Being confident in high school is important and can lead to success in high school (Group Interview, Jan. 29, 2013).

Tiffany also shared that dancing gave her a lot of confidence:

When you perform you are one person performing in front of hundreds of people and what's more nerve-wracking than that? And if you're comfortable in that setting then think about it in the business world if you have to present a presentation. How are you going to get that confidence if you're never performing? I think dance is a very good way of doing that. That confidence of being up in front of people and not being intimidated by a lot of people watching you and having their attention on you just makes it easier (Group Interview, Jan. 29, 2013).

Part of student engagement in school relates to being involved in school activities. The participants said that the confidence and experience they gained within the Dance Academy program facilitated further involvement in other school programs and activities. Michael blossomed over the years and he said that he pursued extra school activities as a result of his increased self-confidence. In Grade 12, he was a very valuable part of the Prairie Collegiate football team, wrestling team, band program, the musical department, and the Dance Academy. Michael shared:

Dancing was the first event I've done extracurricular-wise besides music, but it made me more confident. If I could almost keep up with these girls dancing at

high levels I knew I could probably keep up in all these other sports. I just gave it 110%. I am not the most athletic guy, but I knew I had the heart and I could push through. And I did. So I joined all these sports (Group Interview, Jan. 29, 2013).

Jordan and Elizabeth stated that the Dance Academy gave them the confidence to get involved in other extra-curricular activities such as pom squad, musicals, extra dance routines, and variety night. The pom squad was a competitive dance team that competed in both Saskatchewan and Alberta competitions. For Jordan and Elizabeth, who entered high school with prior dance experience, this was a natural extra-curricular activity to join. Tiffany, Sarah, and Rachel who had less experience also joined the pom squad due to their increased confidence. This experience provided them a sense of belonging within the team and created many lasting friendships and performance opportunities.

Elizabeth said, “I definitely felt like I was a part of the school. Performing at pep rallies, performing at basketball games, and dancing in the musicals got me involved in a different aspect of the school” (Group Interview, Jan. 29, 2013). Jordan agreed with Elizabeth and shared this insight about teenage students in high school:

I think a lot of kids struggle with where they belong in high school. I know high school isn't the best years for some people, but a lot of that is because they don't have a sense of belonging. Kids don't know who they are. They don't know what they really enjoy or where they fit in. I think that Dance Academy for me and probably for a lot of other people gave me a sense of belonging, a sense of who I was so I think it's really important that a lot of us got to experience that (Group Interview, Jan. 29, 2013).

Tiffany shared that she loved dance and because of the dance class she wanted to

try out for the pom squad and other activities. She claimed, “Dance also gave me an advantage and more confidence to try out for musicals; that confidence also helped me perform in Jazz band” (Group Interview, Jan. 29, 2013). Elizabeth said, “By being involved in extra-curricular activities I gained a sense of belonging and felt part of a team and was able to enjoy being put into groups in my other academic classes” (Group Interview, Jan. 29, 2013). Sarah reported that she put everything she had into her involvement in the dance program. These efforts provided her with leadership opportunities and by Grade 12 she was a captain of the pom squad and had the opportunity to coach the junior pom squad. Rachel felt that she was very involved in the dance program and explained, “The pom squad was the only extra-curricular activity I was really involved in, but I truly loved it and I took tons of opportunities to be involved and spend extra time contributing to the success of the team” (Group Interview, Jan. 29, 2013).

The participants described how this involvement and participation in dance was different from other classes that they took in high school. Elizabeth shared that “you were able to learn by practical experience instead of book studies” (Individual Conversation, Jan. 4, 2013)

Tiffany said:

Dance is very interactive, and while you are in class there is a competitive drive that makes you want to be that front girl, which makes you work harder, attend class, and practice outside of school. When it is something that you love, and something you want to do well in, it doesn’t feel like homework when you practice, but it’s fun (Group Interview, Jan. 29, 2013).

Michael shared:

The dance program involved students in an academic and social learning environment as opposed to other classes that were more focused on academics and individualism. Dance projects or collaborations focused on a group effort and depended on every single member. Other classes such as history or sciences are focused on individual effort of the project and can become competitive (Group Interview, Jan. 29, 2013).

Jordan felt:

This involvement was different because I felt like I had more confidence in the dance class compared to a math or English class. I would participate more often because I felt confident in what I was doing and was not afraid to share my ideas. It was also due to the people in the class as well. My classmates in the dance program were not as judgmental compared to those in other classes (Group Interview, Jan. 29, 2013).

Sarah stated:

Dance Academy offers the opportunity for students to interact with classmates and open up to one another in ways other classes can't. Other classes are simply learning from the teacher but in dance we had the opportunity to learn from one another and it was important we worked together with our classmates. Dance Academy gave me the skills to be able to do pom and most other classes don't offer skills that directly help students in extra curricular activities. Dance Academy offered many performance opportunities that were not during school time. Most other classes don't leave the classroom (Group Interview, Jan. 29,

2013).

Rachel shared:

Looking back, the involvement I had in the dance program is different from the involvement I had in some of my other classes because of my attitude towards the classes. I was typically always excited and happy to attend dance class, do assignments and participate in activities when it came to dance. I still enjoyed my other classes, but they often are associated with stress or frustration in my mind. I remember thinking that a lot of assignments in other classes were dumb or pointless and it didn't make me excited to learn (Group Interview, Jan. 29, 2013).

Tiffany felt the dance program impacted her high school experiences by creating opportunities to get involved in other areas such as performing at recitals, pep rallies, basketball game halftimes, and musicals. Elizabeth felt the dance program gave her a sense of belonging and it was a home to her:

I had a family of friends, we all cared for each other and it was never a gossip thing. We all connected. It was really good. I don't think I'd be the person I am without it. I was able to gain confidence in front of an audience which helped me when I was to do a presentation in class and I learned to budget my time because I had dance and I had to begin my assignments as soon as possible in order to complete them on time. I learned not to procrastinate (Individual Conversation, Jan. 4, 2013).

The participants were asked to reflect on a time when they experienced meaningful student involvement in dance. Sarah shared that her Grade 12 dance final was most memorable to her. It was the first time she choreographed a solo and danced on

stage by herself. She said, “I put a lot of work into it and I really wanted it to be really good. Out of any project I did in dance that was the one I cared about the most”

(Individual Conversation, Jan. 5, 2013). Tiffany supported this memory saying:

I put the most time and effort into that dance that I could, and I felt that I would fall asleep thinking of it. It was huge thing of my senior year. And when I think back on my senior year and the last couple of months, that’s majorly what I think of (Group Interview, Jan. 29, 2013).

Rachel also shared that she enjoyed choreographing but what she remembers being most memorable was having the opportunity to teach the rest of the class and lead warm ups. She shared that opportunities to teach the class challenged her to step up as a leader. Rachel said, “It gives you more responsibility and I just felt good and accomplished after it” (Group Interview, Jan. 29, 2013). Elizabeth also shared that choreographing dances made her involved in the dance class:

When we were put into small groups and had to teach a class as well it sparked your creativity and even your confidence just to step out and be able teach it to your classmate. It can be a little nerve wracking sometimes, but it was something that definitely helped (Group Interview, Jan. 29, 2013).

Jordan also believed that choreographing dances and being able to teach the class were memorable experiences and got her actively involved in the class. She commented, “I would put in so much more effort into the assignments because they were important to me” (Individual Conversation, Dec. 29, 2012).

Dance opportunities in school programs can enhance self-confidence and serve to fulfill the individual from a variety of contexts including the physical, emotional,

cognitive, and social aspects of the person. As young people engage in dance through the study of creativity, physicality, skills, choreography, and teamwork, they mature as individuals. This maturity stands to assist them in feeling better about themselves and provides the confidence to pursue new challenges.

When students experience increased self-confidence, they tend to experience success and a stronger belief in themselves and their abilities. This increase in self-confidence contributes to an enhanced connection to what they are learning and encourages their participation in a broad scope of school curricula.

Relationships

Research conducted by Gentry, et al. (2012) examined the importance of positive relationships in high school. The participants in this study were asked in the initial interview what they learned about others through the dance program. The participants revealed that they made many friends that they would not have made had they not been in the dance program at Prairie Collegiate. These girls came from different elementary schools, had different circles of friends, and had different interests outside of school. Elizabeth felt that she made strong connections with many of the other dancers in the program. She said, “They enjoyed the same things as me in dance, we all related to each other, and I feel we understood each other and had fun. We became not only a team but we had a special kind of friendship, almost became sort of a family” (Group Interview, Jan. 29, 2013). Jordan and Sarah also shared that they saw a different side of students in the dance studio than she would have seen in a regular classroom environment. Sarah explained that, through the dance program she learned how to work in groups and how to work with a variety of different people.

The participants indicated that through the Dance Academy program they developed meaningful relationships between both staff and students. They shared that there was something unique between dance teachers and coaches as that draws students to them and creates special relationships. Research implies that teacher-student relationships have effects on students' learning, achievement, and school engagement (Pianta, Hamre, Stuhlman, 2003). Tiffany described the relationship with her dance teacher as someone she could trust and go to for anything. She described her dance teacher as a friend. She also commented on how important it was to receive feedback from teachers that watched her dance at performances and how encouraging it was to her. When asked if she felt she had special relationships with other students through the dance program she stated:

I would not have been friends with a lot of people I was friends with through the dance program had I not enrolled in dance. The Dance Academy gave me a place in high school. I felt like everywhere I went people knew who I was. Staff would know me from the extracurricular dancing I had done through performing; they'd know of me even if I'd never actually met them before (Group Interview, Jan. 29, 2013).

Elizabeth described the relationships that were developed between her and both staff and students that participated in the dance program. She said:

I think the staff and my coaches for dance and for pom squad were my biggest connection for teachers; they were my favorite. I feel they were my good friends but yet still a teacher, they believed in me and never looked down on me. Believing in me more than I believed in myself. And this helped me succeed way more (Individual Conversation, Jan. 4, 2013).

Elizabeth said that her relationships with students were amazing and she made life long friendships:

There were no cliques in Dance Academy, we all had each other and in that hour we were all friends.... That's where I met a lot of my best friends. If I didn't have that place I would never have met these great people...I truly believe the friends I made in the Dance Academy made me the person I wanted to be (Individual Conversation, Jan. 4, 2013).

Michael shared that he developed a great relationship with the teacher of the dance program. He said, "I felt comfortable; I felt if I had an issue or if I needed somewhere to go, I could go to you or the dance studio" (Individual Conversation, Jan. 9, 2013). He also felt supported from other teachers who would talk to him about dance and what he was working on in class.

Rachel said that dance brought her a lot of happiness. "I think it was one of the biggest reasons why I liked going to school because I got to dance there, and obviously the people who were there shared the same interests" (Individual Conversation, Jan. 2, 2013). Jordan described her relationship with the teachers of the dance program as a friendship:

These relationships with teachers affected my experiences in high school and made it more comfortable to open up because you have someone to go to for help if you have any problems. These relationships were not just in school but outside of school as well. Someone to talk to that you trust and feel comfortable with (Individual Conversation, Dec. 29, 2012).

Sarah said:

I definitely made quite a few friends that I don't think I would have connected with unless we had that common dance thing. When you get all these girls in the same grade especially together, and you dance together, you bond.... And with you being my teacher, I felt like you were the teacher I had the closest bond with out of everybody because of all the time spent together, I felt like you cared about how I did and pushed me to be better. Because of you I just wanted to do really well (Individual Conversation, Jan. 5, 2013).

Relationships affected Sarah's experiences in high school because as she stated, "It gave me a good crowd of people to hang around with, especially the pom girls. They were good girls to have as friends. Through dance I gained really good friends, and had great relationships with teachers" (Individual Conversation, Jan. 5, 2013). Rachel said:

The relationships that I developed with the teachers were positive relationships. It wasn't just an in class type of relationship, it was a life relationship. It was different than with other teachers. She's very nice. I think that the way that she cared about my life out of dance made me care about her and so it was a stronger relationship. I trusted her more than any other teacher. With students, these are relationships that I never would have made if I wasn't in the dance program so it was cool just to meet people who were outside of my bubble or outside my typical friend group (Individual Conversation, Jan. 2, 2013).

Tiffany reflected, "When you have friends in your classes it makes you want to go to your classes" (Group Interview, Jan. 29, 2013). Elizabeth explained that in dance:

...I made more friends in high school than I would have cause you're in a class where it's very interactive so you're kind of just tossed in there and you need to

be able to talk to these people. You're creating things together so you need to communicate. You have a relationship built with these dancers and if they are in some of your other classes you're not as nervous to answer questions cause you've got a few friends and so you're a little more confident and just happier in general cause you have these relationships established (Individual Conversation, Jan. 4, 2013).

Sarah shared that she connected with other teachers because they showed an interest in what she was doing in dance and on the pom team:

It seemed like teachers really cared about how the pom team was doing and so I was excited to talk to them about it. Whenever I'd go to class that's what we'd talk about dance or pom and because they showed that they were interested I was more engaged in their class (Individual Conversation, Dec. 27, 2012).

Tiffany affirmed that student-teacher relationships are really important. As a group they discussed how certain teachers made learning fun, which created a more engaging class. Tiffany said, "If you have that one teacher that you really love and you love how they teach you're going to want to be there and you're going to be engaged in your learning" (Individual Conversation, Jan. 5, 2013). Jordan also agreed about how important it is to establish good relationships with teachers. Jordan shared:

I think I'm a completely different person; if I don't like my teacher and I feel intimidated and uncomfortable, I kind of shut down and I keep to myself. If there's a teacher where I like their presence, they are encouraging, they are nice to you, and they are positive, I am happier and more engaged (Individual Conversation, Dec. 29, 2012).

Jordan attributed positive student-teacher relationships to creating an engaging learning environment. In this group interview the participants shared how perceptive they are of teachers. Rachel shared, “If you know the teacher wants you there, you’re going to want to be there” (Group Interview, Jan. 29, 2013). She said students skip more if they feel that the teachers don’t care about them or that no one will notice if they are gone. All of the participants agreed how contagious teachers’ excitement about what they are teaching is. In the group interview, Elizabeth said that the teachers who impacted her most were teachers that showed her that they cared. “They cared about us as students but they also cared about what they were teaching. This excitement was contagious” (Group Interview, Jan. 29, 2013). Tiffany added, “If a teacher’s not excited, why would we ever think that what we are learning would be important or exciting to us” (Group Interview, Jan. 29, 2013).

Through their conversations, these students outlined a strong social connection to learning and feeling connected to places of learning, their classmates, teachers, and curriculum. Participants shared the importance of building strong relationships in their dance classes and recognized that these relationships in several cases were unexpected. In order to build relationships, an element of trust had to be established which led to feelings of care and belonging. This emotional aspect to learning and belonging further supported student engagement within their dance explorations. Students experienced a desire to come to class, participate, and experienced the joy of contagious learning.

Sense of Belonging

Students identified the need to find a place in school where they could *‘fit in’* and experience a sense of belonging. Students can feel a sense of isolation and exclusion in

high school settings. Self-perceptions of belonging emerge from a variety of contexts and how students perceive they '*fit in*' is important to their experience in high school. Gentry, Steenbergen, and Choi (2012) reported that students who experience a sense of belonging in school become more engaged at school.

Each of the participants shared their experiences of the impact dance had on their sense of belonging and how important it was to belonging. Tiffany said, "At lunch if you didn't have anywhere to go you could go to the dance room. There was always a place to go and you were always accepted there." Tiffany also shared:

I felt that I belonged in the Dance Academy and there were girls that didn't like to party either. It made me enjoy high school more because I had a place to go. At lunch time, a bunch of us dance girls would go to the dance studio, turn up the music and dance and have fun together. It was good; it was great memories (Individual Conversation, Jan. 5, 2013).

Michael was the first male dancer in the Dance Academy that completed four years. He described how the dance program at Prairie Collegiate gave him a sense of belonging and an identity in high school.

In the Dance Academy there was no one like me, there was only one Michael in the whole school and everyone would recognize me, know me. It was nice. I felt like I was something in high school not just another Asian kid. When I first started in Grade 9, or even before then some of the teachers were telling me not to take dance because I would be the only guy but I still stuck with it, which I'm glad I did cause it put me aside from everyone else. I didn't like to be a clone in

high school. I just hated that; that was my fear—just blending in. So, yeah, it was a great high school experience (Individual Conversation, Jan. 9, 2013).

Sarah described the dance studio and Dance Academy program as her “go to place.” She said “the girls that were there were usually the girls that I would talk to and bring problems to and stuff. It definitely gave me a circle of friends from varying grades” (Individual Conversation, Jan. 5, 2013). Sarah further explained why the dance program provided her with a sense of belonging:

You could find me in the dance room most lunches and breaks hanging out with pom girls or other girls in the Dance Academy. It was the place I felt most comfortable and I always enjoyed the time I spent in the Dance Academy. I always felt included in things going on in the dance program and was always looking to get more involved. I made some of my closest friends through the dance program, which added to the sense of belonging (Individual Conversation, Jan. 15, 2012).

Rachel commented, “Dance was the one thing I did besides my academic classes. I made friends in dance that I wouldn’t have made if I was not in dance.

Tiffany and Jordan enjoyed the fact that they always had a place to go to hang out. They shared how the dance studio was open at lunch to practice and socialize with friends and that was very positive for the both of them. Elizabeth explained that the dance program gave her a sense of belonging and that “it felt good to have a place to belong and a place where I fit in, felt smart, and was successful” (Individual Conversation, Jan. 4, 2013).

Experiencing a sense of identity through dance and within the studio was an important experience for these participants. They found a sense of belonging and strength in identifying that dance actually helped define them in unique ways. Michael said the dance program “gave me identity, letting me do something artistic and physical at the same time” (Individual Conversation, Jan. 9, 2013). He shared that the Dance Academy helped him make friends, and through dance he became recognized and respected in high school. He shared “...even outside of high school and people from Prairie Collegiate who graduated from there still recognize me” (Individual Conversation, Jan. 9, 2013). He furthered:

Like everyone coming into high school for the first time, I had trouble finding a group that I belonged to. When I started dancing, I got more involved with people and the culture that came with it, which I felt I belonged to. The more I practiced, performed, and spent time with people who also shared a similar interest, the more I felt comfortable being in school. I believe most people have something they are proud of or talented at which identifies them, I found dancing to give me a sense of identity in high school (Group Interview, Jan. 29, 2013).

Sarah agreed:

I think most people in high school find something that’s their ‘thing’ something they really enjoy, are good at and invest time in. I feel dance was my ‘thing’ and if you asked my peers they would agree; therefore, I’d say it was kind of my identity. I was involved in a lot of aspects of the Dance Academy like special dance numbers and both junior and senior pom (Group Interview, Jan. 29, 2013).

Jordan summarized, “If students don’t have a sense of belonging, you don’t know who you are or where you fit in” (Group Interview, Jan. 29, 2013). Jordan explained, “The Dance Academy gave you a sense of belonging, a sense of who you are. I think it’s really important that a lot of us got to experience that” (Group Interview, Jan. 29, 2013).

Building on relationships, a strong sense of belonging through the dance curriculum in the Dance Academy Program was important for these participants. They felt a sense of place in the studio that felt right and provided them with a sense of identity beyond the academic experiences in school. This affirmation of self through these experiences provided students with a further sense of confidence and engagement in school. They found a place where they could feel safe, explore themselves creatively, and build on their knowledge and skills in dance.

Improved Sense of Self-Worth

Each of these former students shared their experiences of how the dance program at Prairie Collegiate impacted their years in high school and of the benefits derived from their arts education classes. Dance, as a course in high schools, offers students the opportunities to engage in a program of learning, gain confidence, build unique relationships and friendships in an educational environment, develop an increased sense of self-worth, and engage in physical activity. The participants believed this opportunity should exist as a class choice during their academic years in high school. As a class, it provided students with opportunities to learn about themselves and about an area of study that many might not otherwise experience. Several participants also reinforced their belief that dance helped them improve academically through the increased confidence they experienced.

Any time students receive positive feedback or reinforcement, either directly from the teacher, their peers, or through positive learning experiences, the boost in self-confidence can contribute to a greater sense of self-worth. Students begin to believe in themselves in new ways and with increased capacity that heightens their awareness of what it means to feel good about one's self. The results of increased self-worth can be seen through a variety of contexts. Students who recognize their accomplishments and the value in meeting a new challenge will continue to strive for engagement in their learning through feelings of success and belonging. It is almost like the emergence of a hidden personal curriculum that says, "I matter, I am good at this, my contributions are worthy, I am valued, and I will continue to move forward."

Tiffany said:

A lot of people have always wanted to dance but just don't have the opportunity. In a high school setting anyone can do it. If you join a studio when you're a teenager it's weird. You can't do that; everyone is more advanced than you. So some people feel like they've lost out on some experiences if they don't get put in dance when they're younger. The Dance Academy gives you a perfect opportunity, especially with the three different classes. Then you don't feel stupid for not knowing anything because then you're in an environment where everyone is in the same boat as you and everyone is learning together (Group Interview, Jan. 29, 2013).

Michael spoke about how popular dance is now with television shows and video games:

Dance has become so popularized now-a-days with the Wii and everything, so giving an outlet for students to express that in a school environment is great because where else would they do it? They would just be restricted and this gives them more opportunities to explore life, I guess (Group Interview, Jan. 29, 2013).

Rachel agreed:

I definitely think it does create a place for people to learn dance and you can come in with no experience and not feel you're not good because there are people of every level; it's not an elite thing that only certain people can do. It's an inviting place that anybody can go and hang out in there. It gives you self-confidence and creates a sense of place of belonging (Group Interview, Jan. 29, 2013).

Rachel believed a benefit of having a dance program in high school was being able to recognize that people learn in different ways:

Obviously (academics) it's very important, but to even show students just because you're not good or naturally inclined to be good at math and maybe you have to work a little harder than the other kids doesn't make you less smart. To be able to show them that learning in this other way is very important as well. Just to have that different classroom setting is also important. To be more relationships based and more encouraging of other people all the time was different from other classes. To have that type of learning and that type of classroom where you can get physical activity is also very important (Group Interview, Jan. 29, 2013).

Sarah felt that dance taught her leadership skills and how to work as a team:

It's about learning when to compromise and learning when to step up. It is important to realize kids are so different and not all the kids learn the same way.

For many of us, dance was a way that we learned together. Our character improved and we all connected and made special bonds with each other (Group Interview, Jan. 29, 2013).

Jordan shared:

Dance or any of the arts programs are like the most personal classes where you actually get to know people on a more personal level. Dance is so interactive. You take out classes like dance and those opportunities to feel a sense of belonging are not going to happen. In high school if I didn't have dance I would have been lost (Group Interview, Jan. 29, 2013).

Tiffany spoke about learning how to move forward after making mistakes. She explained:

In dance you're going to be making so many mistakes in routines, in front of people and in the studio. Learning how to not dwell on those mistakes and learning how to fight through them is a huge skill to have in life. As they say, "The show must go on" (Individual Conversation, Jan. 5, 2013).

Michael shared that dance gives you a lot of skills that you don't learn in academic classes. Work ethic was one thing that he felt dance taught him:

In dance class, the only way to get better at it is to work harder. You can't just cram a dance routine you have to practice. You can't fake it. In other classes you can fake it sometimes and pretend that you know what you're doing. But you can't fake dance because it's pretty obvious when somebody doesn't know what you are doing (Individual Conversation, Jan.9, 2013).

Elizabeth pointed out in her first interview that she struggled academically due to a learning disability. In school she received low marks and didn't feel she was good at anything. Elizabeth was extremely successful in the dance program and felt this experience enhanced her abilities in other classes:

Dance helped me to believe in myself and not allow me to give up on myself. I knew I was able to memorize a dance off by heart, so I believed I could memorize things for an exam. With the success I got in learning steps or dances, I would try the same work ethic to memorize things in class. Growing up I was put in resource room. I believed that I was behind the class and I was considered stupid. As the years went on I began to think that I was never going to be successful in any academic courses. I spent my summer between Grade 8 and Grade 9 in fear. Fear that I would never pass high school. I entered the Dance Academy in Grade 9 and found that I was accepted and could keep up. I felt respected, and I also felt that I was not a failure. In my other classes, people didn't think that I was dumb and people actually asked me to join their group. With this new confidence, I was able to contribute to the conversation of the group and try without first feeling defeated. Although I still had to work extra hard, working through late nights and many weekends, it made me believe that I could make it. By realizing I could succeed in dance with hard work, I knew it could happen in the academic world. Just never give up and look forward to the 'Show' (Individual Conversation, Dec. 12, 2012).

Rachel reinforced how dance has impacted her ability in other classes:

I feel like dance really helped me learn that I could be successful at things that are new to me. It really taught me that I needed to work hard to succeed. I learnt a solid work ethic is so important, and that if I'm not trying my best then I am letting myself down. I think now, looking back, I can see that it taught me that I shouldn't compare my abilities to other people. There will always be someone who is better than I am, and I can still be successful being the best I can be, while not being better than everyone else. People have different gifts and natural abilities, and that is good! That's what makes this world such an exciting place to live. The success I found in dance gave me confidence in high school, with other students and teachers and I think this greatly enriched my experience and engagement in school (Individual Conversation, Nov. 24, 2012).

After Rachel stated that dance was her favorite class of the day, she explained why it was important to give students the opportunities to learn dance in a high school setting and the possible impact dance can have on students' core academic classes. Rachel shared that "it is important to give students opportunities to learn dance in a high school setting because it is important for them to learn things that they can't get from sitting in a desk all day" (Individual Conversation, Jan. 2, 2013). She described many ways dance offers students a different way to learn:

For them to actually get up, try new things, be challenged to work in groups and work as a team, and also to learn how to take and give constructive criticism in a way they may not be able to in an academic class (Individual Conversation, Jan. 2, 2013).

The participants also felt that dance was beneficial because it was different from other classes where you sit in a desk and take notes. Jordan felt dance stimulated the brain in different ways from other classes. She felt that the dance classes helped with ways to study and engaged her in her learning.

Tiffany found that dance “offered a break in between classes and I found myself a lot more awake and alert for my other classes” (Individual Conversation, Jan. 5, 2013). Elizabeth shared that “by learning the dance routines and doing them over and over my memory skills were exercised and I was able to memorize for exams easier” (Individual Conversation, Jan. 4, 2013). Michael believed that the dance program helped relieve stress from school through physical exercise and focus. Sarah believed “having an hour of dance during my day really affected my performance in other classes. It was a break from the harder classes like calculus and biology and allowed me to have some fun and get some physical activity” (Individual Conversation, Jan. 5, 2013).

In the group interview, students shared how dance kept them physically active and how the dance program impacted their physical lifestyle today. Participants began to realize the benefits of the physicality of dance and how it enhanced their mental and physical well-being. They looked forward to the mental and physical work it took to do well within the dance classes and this transferred into their other academic functions and increased successful feelings and outcomes. Elizabeth shared:

Physical activity can be thought of as something people don’t want to do but, for me, when I was dancing I was obviously sweating a lot but I was enjoying it. I wasn’t thinking about how high my heart rate was or how hard this was or how

tired I was, I just wanted to learn the dance (Individual Conversation, Jan. 4, 2013).

Tiffany shared that she wanted to improve her endurance outside of class so that she could perform dance routines full out without feeling so tired.

Sarah remembered how hard she worked in dance practices, especially pom rehearsals and gives credit to the dance class for getting her in the best shape of her life. Rachel credited the fun learning environment in dance to keeping her physically active. They danced because they wanted to, not because they had to. This played a part in keeping them active and wanting to dance in the future.

Jordan was a dancer who was already dancing a lot outside of school so having a dance program offered in school increased her physical lifestyle even more. She stated, “Having extra practices with pom and extra practices with Dance Academy increased my stamina to do well in my extra-curricular activities” (Individual Conversation, Dec. 29, 2012). Elizabeth added that the morning is the best time to do physical activity, claiming “your brain’s good for the rest of the day, you’re awake, you’re alert so that was another plus” (Group Interview, Jan. 29, 2013). Rachel highlighted the fact that dance is a great way to be physically active in high school:

After Grade 10, you don’t take gym in high school any more so without the Dance Academy I would have been doing no physical activity. I hate physical activity, but to have dance class at school made me lead a different life style because I was always practicing with my pom team or in class so it helped me lead an active lifestyle (Group Interview, Jan. 29, 2013).

Jordan explained:

Dance was another opportunity to get extra physical activity especially once you get to Grades 11 and 12. Some people don't choose anything so you don't get any activity and you don't get recess so you're not outside either so it's a good way to refresh your brain from sitting down and stuff. Being active also helps your learning in other classes because it's stimulating your brain in a different ways and using different parts of it and helping you think differently, which obviously those skills you can apply physically in your classroom, as well presenting and stuff like that (Group Interview, Jan. 29, 2013).

Offering students an opportunity to be active within the school day can also benefit their other academic classes. Jordan and Michael spoke about how dance kept them alert in other curricular classes. Michael shared, "I fell asleep in every class. After lunch, I would be wide awake because I'd go to the dance studio at lunch" (Individual Conversation, Jan. 9, 2013). Giving students the opportunity to be active within their school day can benefit them both physically and mentally by improving their overall health and keeping them alert in class.

Each of these students shared their experiences of how the Dance Academy program at Prairie Collegiate impacted and benefitted them through their years in high school. These students pointed out the benefits they experienced through dance. Many students are not afforded the opportunity to take dance in high schools and from the students' responses it appears evident that students appreciated the wide variety of learning opportunities experienced through dance leading to improved overall student engagement and well-being.

With childhood obesity on the rise and the increase in a sedentary lifestyle, it is important to find ways to keep our youth active. Many students, especially female students in high school, dislike physical education classes and it can be difficult to motivate them to fully participate. In this study, the participants drew upon the benefits dance has in keeping students active in high school.

The overall achievement experienced by the participants, the challenges they overcame, and the success they felt about themselves and their accomplishments contributed to a greater sense of self-worth. When they experienced a caring environment, positive relationships, and improved self-confidence; they recognized their own potential in new ways and validated their experiences through positive outcomes and hard work.

Student Engagement

The goal within this research was to learn if student engagement was affected through the participants, four-year participation within a Dance Academy Program in a high school setting. During the interview process, participants were provided the following definition of student engagement used within this study to assist them in understanding the question and definition of engagement more fully: student engagement occurs when students are invested in their learning (Barkley, 2009; Carini, Kuh, & Klein, 2006). “Student engagement is the product of motivation and active learning. It is a product rather than a sum because it will not occur if either element is missing” (Barkley, 2009, p. 10). Student engagement has been linked to student success (Carini, Kuh & Klein, 2006).

Participants were invited to respond to this definition and provide their insight and experience in relation to student engagement through their dance experiences. They described the Dance Academy as a fun, challenging, exciting, and friendly environment to learn which was different from other classes they took. Tiffany explained:

I felt like the students were very engaged in this class, assignments were things that we were passionate about, and stuff that we actually cared about, therefore completing the work wasn't an issue. If we didn't attend class, we would fall behind in choreography, and in something as interactive as dance, you don't want to stick out for doing something wrong (Individual Conversation, Jan. 5, 2013).

Michael said the "Dance Academy provided a relief from stress derived from the studious routine of the day. The more I engaged myself in dancing at school, the more positive energy I had for the next school day" (Individual Conversation, Jan. 9, 2013). Jordan shared that she was very engaged in dance and that she would spend extra time outside of class either practicing dances, working on choreography, or helping with the year-end recitals. Rachel, Sarah, and Elizabeth also felt that they were engaged in dance and put a lot of time and effort into the assignments because they meant something to them. Sarah shared, "The dance program encouraged my involvement in the pom squad and without taking dance I wouldn't have been able to participate in pom, which ended up being one of my favorite activities in high school" (Individual Conversation, Jan. 15, 2013).

Jordan, Sarah, and Rachel all felt that the dance program increased their engagement and motivation in high school. They found themselves immersed in the study of dance and invested themselves within the active components of learning. Sarah said:

I feel like, looking back for me, high school became centered around dance because I felt like I was so involved and so that's where I found my identity. It made it really positive and looking back, these experiences with pom and dance, are some of my favorite experiences in high school (Group Interview, Jan. 29, 2013).

Rachel agreed:

It was the time that I got to be with the people I wanted to be with, and we got to do fun things. It was a good break from the academic; it was the big draw of why I wanted to go to school some days (Group Interview, Jan. 29, 2013).

Research links student success with being engaged in school (Willms, Friesen, Milton, 2009) and as educators we know the importance of engagement and student learning (Taylor, & Parsons, 2011). Part of this engagement involves active learning and contributing to one's knowledge and experience through participation in classes. When students feel invested in their learning, they develop feelings of ownership within class study and the curriculum takes on life and meaning for them. These experiences lead to further student engagement.

Participants emphasized the value of performance opportunities that pushed them outside of their comfort zone. Through these opportunities, success became an integral part in building personal self-confidence in their skills and their abilities. These experiences encouraged leadership roles and participants extended themselves into other areas of school activities. They said they felt happy in the dance classes. The passion and love they described for their dance opportunities called them back to the studio each day. They wanted to be present. They became comfortable in themselves and cared less, or

differently, about how they were perceived by others which is a big piece of social belonging and personal maturity within a high school. Due to hard work, their success transferred into good marks that refueled their engagement.

Dance provided participants with a curriculum that they may not have experienced otherwise outside of school. The participants felt that dance recognized their different learning styles and applauded their efforts in learning new skills.

Participants affirmed that dance taught them the value of a good work ethic that transferred into other aspects of their lives at school. They experienced that in dance you can't 'fake it' and there is a huge accountability factor to yourself and your peers to practice hard, be in attendance, and contribute because dance is not an individual learning experience like many academic classes are.

They learned not to give up on themselves or their tasks. They experienced a sense of achievement in dance that led them to believe they could accomplish their goals and succeed in other areas as well. They began to believe in themselves as individuals through these experiences.

Participants recognized the benefits of the hard work and physicality that was required within the Dance Academy program and felt the physical and mental outcomes of this exercise. They said it enhanced alertness in other classes and helped them maintain focus throughout their day.

Students who feel "at home" in a learning environment and within the context of a subject remain engaged in their learning and experience a stronger sense of belonging. A sense of identity emerges through learning and if a student can see him or herself inside the curriculum and relate to it, there is a greater chance that he or she will retain interest,

motivation, and therefore, engagement. Participants felt that they were cared for in the dance program. There was an element of trust between themselves, their teacher, their peers, and the subject.

Unexpected relationships between students were developed through their dance experiences. Students who previously were not engaged in particular friendships found themselves with similar passions through dance. Students found their dance peers to be supportive, non-judgmental, and positive role models. Their teacher became more like a respected friend, someone they could go talk to and share with. Participants felt that their teacher taught with a passion and excitement that built on the student teacher relationship, the subject, and enhanced student relationships. The teacher, who created a pleasant learning environment, and a safe haven in the studio fostered success and acceptance. Relating to the social and emotional needs of students is important for building feelings of success and belonging through strong relationships.

Chapter 5: Reflective Thoughts

“Great dancers are not great because of their technique they are great because of their passion.” ~Martha Graham

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of a high school dance program on student engagement. Teaching in the Dance Academy Program at Prairie Collegiate over several years, I observed what I believed were positive outcomes of students' experiences within the program, yet, there was no formal research to support or contest these observations. It was necessary to hear the voices of the participants, sharing their experiences, to understand the outcomes their dance experiences and curricular initiatives provided for them. The participants openly affirmed the value derived from experiencing dance over four years in high school through 1) increased confidence, 2) developing meaningful relationships, 3) increased sense of belonging, and 4) an overall sense of self-worth.

High school can be a very intimidating time for students. There are hundreds of students in a very large collegiate and many teachers to get to know. Large volumes of students and many new teachers can seem overwhelming at times. Building relationships in high school is important and developing a sense of belonging for students is often a primary social goal that students strive to fulfill. How students feel about themselves, their friends, and being accepted often establishes their perceptions of self-worth and success as individuals.

Schools can have a powerful impact on student engagement and student achievement (Willms, 2000; Friesen & Milton, 2009) by offering programs that interest students. Dance encourages students to think and move more creatively, get away from the desk routines in academic classes, and offers a unique way to experience learning.

Through classes such as dance, students are given many opportunities to work with others in a co-operative group setting. These experiences teach students valuable life skills to prepare them for the future.

Schools today are focusing more attention on improving national testing results and moving towards standardized tests. Students are taking more math and science classes and have less time to take courses such as the arts (Ornstein, 2003). It is extremely important that schools work to develop well-rounded individuals by offering and making available opportunities to study a variety of subjects. McGaw, Piper, Banks and Evans (1992) reported that one of the key outcomes of schooling was the development of students. Through courses such as dance, the participants were given an opportunity to take a class that they were interested in and were actively engaged in. Dance develops students' personal and social skills, as well as building positive self-esteem, self-discipline, and improved self-worth.

Balmer (2012) encourages schools to use a wide variety of programs and curricula opportunities for students to engage in. The participants affirmed Balmer's position with their passionate claims about how dance influenced their learning, self-confidence, relationships, sense of belonging and self-worth within a high school. In order to facilitate stronger outcomes for students (Greene, 1986, Noddings, 2011, Spencer, 1966 & Ornstein, 2003) educators must pay attention to the learning styles and interests of students and ensure that we offer classes that they can engage in. Engaging students in our classrooms is important to their overall success and experiences in high school (Gentry, et al., 2012).

The arts are often the first programs to be omitted from schools and yet they can offer students enormous educational potential (Eisner, 2010; Fowler, 1996 & Hannah, 1997). The arts are often viewed as less important than other subjects such as math and science, however, the arts are effective for students that do not do well in traditional classrooms (Cook, 2005; Harland et al., 2000). The participants in this research shared repeatedly how the Dance Academy was one of their most memorable experiences in high school and that through dance they gained numerous skills that transferred to other subject areas. The participants supported what the literature stated about the value of classes such as dance in high school.

Positive Student Outcomes through Dance

High school can be a difficult transition for many students. These are the years when students are trying to figure out who they are and where they fit in. Through these years, many students struggle with self-esteem and confidence. Schnitt & Schnitt (1988) found that students taking dance felt better about themselves. The students who participated in this research project validated that claim. Elizabeth shared that in Grade 9 she was very shy but, through performance opportunities and dancing in front of her peers in class, she gained confidence and she noticed she was not as shy in traditional classes, making it easier to present to the class or work in group settings. All six of the participants shared how through performing in front of audiences, they were less shy and became more confidence, boosting their self-esteem.

Libbey (2004) stated that high school students do better if they are engaged in school and if they make meaningful relationships with staff and students. Classes such as dance are interactive and students have a unique opportunity to get to know the teachers

and classmates in a non-traditional environment. The students who participated in this study shared how relationships that were formed in the dance class were much stronger with the teachers and classmates than they were in other traditional classrooms. Dance is very personal and therefore strong relationships are fostered between the teachers and the students (Gentry et al. 2012). Students were interested in their learning and cared about the class, in part, because a strong relationship was formed. The participants shared that they knew the teacher cared about them and therefore it made them want to attend class and complete the assignments. This evidence contributes to the literature, supporting the understanding that building positive relationships with both teachers and students is essential for successful feelings and an increase in student engagement.

One of the ways to engage students in school is to create a sense of belonging (Willms et al., 2009). Through this research, the participants revealed how important it was to have a space in the school where they felt they belonged. Michael shared how the Dance Academy gave him a sense of belonging, an identity in high school. Even though he wished there were more males in the class beside him, he still maintained confidence and was engaged in his learning. For Sarah and Jordan, the Dance Academy became their *go to place* and provided a sense of belonging and a sense of who you are.

At times, students can feel a sense of isolation and exclusion in high school settings. Self-perceptions of belonging emerge from a variety of contexts and how students perceive they *fit in* is important to their experience in high school.

Finn's (1989) taxonomy of engagement examines students' level of participation in the extracurricular activities offered to them by their schools. Finn (1989) argued that

with such participation comes an identity with school and a belonging that can help to promote a feeling of self-worth, making students become resilient learners.

Carini, Kuh & Klein (2006) suggested that student engagement is linked to student success. Students who are engaged demonstrate improved grades, a sense of belonging, stronger skills, and an improved self-perception (Taylor & Parsons, 2011). The students that participated in this research study reinforced these claims. Elizabeth struggled academically all throughout elementary school. In high school, she gained confidence through dance and came to believe in herself. This new confidence transferred to other subject areas and she graduated and went on to study post-secondary education. Elizabeth believed that dance was instrumental to her success in school demonstrating the powerful impact student engagement can have on student achievement (Willms, Friesen & Milton, 2009).

Schools today are working diligently to increase student engagement in high school. Studies show that by high school students are chronically disengaged from school (Klem & Connell 2004). Students become engaged when they are interested in the learning and feel confident about what they are doing (McGaw, Piper & Banks, 1992). Each of the participants involved in this study felt engaged in the Dance Academy program. Tiffany shared that because she was engaged in the class, she was interested in the assignments and enjoyed doing the assignments or practicing the dances. Jordan shared that she would spend extra time outside of class working on the dances and helping with the year-end recitals. Sarah and Rachel shared that the Dance Academy program impacted their high school experience in a positive way, making dance the most memorable experiences in high school.

Student engagement describes meaningful student involvement in the learning environment (Willms et al., 2009). The participants all indicated that because of dance they became more meaningfully involved in high school extra-curricular activities. Michael claimed that the Dance Academy gave him the confidence to be actively involved in high school. By Grade 12, he was well recognized around the school as an athlete, musician, actor, and dancer. The participants also shared how their involvement in the Dance Academy gave them the confidence to become actively involved in other activities at Prairie Collegiate and dance made them want to come to school. They shared that they were engaged in dance and it was a meaningful experience to them throughout their high school years.

Dance is a practical way of learning and is beneficial physically, emotionally, and socially. Dance lessons are also expensive and not everyone can afford to take classes outside of school. Dance programs such as the one at Prairie Collegiate offers all students the opportunity to learn to dance. Experiencing dance in a high school setting provides students with an opportunity to explore another strands of the fine arts and offers a class where students can be actively engaged in their learning.

Pedagogical Practice

The participants outlined several factors within their experiences that thematically emerged within the data that influenced student engagement. Participants were motivated and invested in their learning, experienced feelings of success, and were actively involved in learning outcomes. It is important to recognize the data inside another dimension in relation to pedagogy and what effective teachers do to promote student engagement. Whether the pedagogical strategies are by design or emerge through a

hidden curriculum it is of value to understand how the key pieces of care, trust, contagious learning, and success, as identified by participants within the data are woven together through the emergent themes, by good teaching and pedagogical practice. The positive outcomes that students identify within their school experiences that may lead to student engagement are important general strategies for students to experience and teachers to engage in. The following themes represent key factors that influenced the participants' experiences within the dance program.

Care and trust

Caring student-teacher relationships were identified as a key component to student engagement in the Dance Academy program. The participants valued their relationships with their teacher and mentioned how their relationships affected their feelings of success and engagement in the class. Tiffany shared how important it is to love your teachers and the way they teach. She shared how in dance she had a special relationship with her teacher and loved going to class, which made learning fun and engaged her in her learning. Elizabeth said teachers who impacted her were the ones that showed her that they cared. "They cared about us as students but they also cared about what they were teaching. This excitement was contagious" (Individual Conversation, Jan. 4, 2013).

Noddings (1995) stated, "We will not achieve even that meager success unless our children believe that they themselves are cared for and learn to care for others" (p. 55). Noddings (1995) described teachers as very special people in the lives of children and spoke to the importance of spending time "developing relationships of trust, talking with students about problems that are central to their lives, and guiding them toward greater

sensitivity and competence across all the domains of care” (p. 61). Students who feel cared for are more motivated and engaged to learn when they feel that their teacher cares about their success.

The participants emphasized the impact the caring learning environment had on their experience in the Dance Academy. These students felt they had a positive relationship with their teacher, which allowed them to be comfortable and establish trust. The students felt that the teacher believed in them, and cared for them, and that the teacher had an invested interest in them. “If you know the teacher wants you there, you’re going to want to be there” (Individual Conversation, Jan. 2, 2013). Rachel said students skip more if they feel that the teachers do not care about them or that no one will notice if they are gone. Tiffany shared how important it was to feel comfortable in class and said, “In class my teacher always encouraged me and pushed me to work to my potential. This made me work harder and believe in myself” (Individual Conversation, Jan. 5, 2013). Jordan said, “Knowing my teacher cared about me and believed in me gave me confidence in my ability” (Individual Conversation, Dec. 29, 2012).

The Dance Academy program was unique as the students and their teacher worked actively together creating works of art. Greene (1995) stated, “Encounters with the arts nurture and sometimes provoke the growth of individuals who reach out to one another as they seek clearings in their experience and try to live more ardently in the world” (p. 39). Dance and other art forms involve passion, energy, and commitment (Tishman, Perkins, & Jay, 1995). With this passion, energy, and commitment, students become invested and motivated to learn.

Dance creates an opportunity for students to be active and out of their desks for an hour a day. Engaging students in school has a lot to do with creating an active learning environment. The participants in this study shared how important being active in dance was to their overall success in high school. Being active made them alert for their other classes and dance gave them an opportunity to relieve stress from other things happening through out their day. Michael shared, “In the morning I would have trouble staying awake in class. After dance I would be wide awake and alert in all my other classes” (Individual Conversation, Jan. 15, 2013).

Sarah shared:

Dance was a great stress reliever from my other classes. If I was stressed out or having a bad day, dance was always a class that could make me feel better. It provided me with an hour to release some of my frustration.”

Greene (1995) stated that the arts can move students to “imagine, extend and renew” (p. 39). Greene (1995) emphasized the importance of creating an active learner where students are educated to grow and become different, to find their individual voices, and to participate in a community in the making. Active learning is key to engaging students in class and the participants shared how the active environment created in the dance impacted their engagement.

Active learning cannot happen without a sense of trust and care within a learning experience. Students need to feel safe, trusted, and cared for in order to extend themselves and be a part of the creative process. Trusting students with extending and applying their skills within choreography and providing positive feedback and encouragement will lead to successful learning and positive experiences. Students learn

to care for and about each other's contributions and they build caring relationships through these interactions. They also care about their contributions and recognize that they are visible in a dance class in unique ways outside of the classroom where learning can be more individual.

Contagious learning, making learning fun

Teachers have the greatest impact on student learning and engagement. Good teachers make the classes fun and exciting, drawing students in, encouraging them to learn more. Good teachers teach “content that enhances student engagement and makes knowledge more meaningful” (Perkins, 2004, p. 246). Dryden (1995) referred to good teachers as those that do not just teach subjects, but they teach people. These teachers are passionate about their subjects and care a great deal that the subject is learned. This passion can be transferred to the class when the teacher's passion brings life to the learning experiences. This kind of teacher creates a feeling of excitement and welcome within the class, and a sense of belonging that leads students to feel a part of the class and enhances student engagement. The participants shared the impact of the teacher's excitement and how contagious this was to their learning. They shared that when teachers made learning fun, it validated their belief in the program and what learning was being taught. When teachers are excited it becomes contagious and students are engaged in their learning.

Students need to be motivated in order to be authentically engaged in their learning. When teachers demonstrate their passion for their subject it draws the students in and awakens them to the joy of learning. Palmer (1997) described himself as a teacher:

I am a teacher at heart, and there are moments in the classroom when I can hardly hold the joy. When my students and I discover uncharted territory to explore, when the pathway out of a thicket opens up before us, when our experience is illumined by the lightning-life of the mind then teaching is the finest work I know (p. 62).

The arts offer teachers an opportunity to teach outside the box. Pogrow (2009) shared that good teachers engage students by making lessons authentic. He believed teachers need to create “learning experiences that are so fascinating that students cannot help to be drawn into them and hang on every word and gesture” (p. 248). In order for students to be engaged in their learning, they need to be motivated. Good teaching strategies motivate students and move students to be invested in their learning. Pogrow (2008) talks about teaching outrageously and argues that outrageous instruction will have students engaged, attentive, and above all curious in their learning. “When teachers apply their imagination to teaching, students will apply their imagination to learning” (p. 251). In the group interview both Tiffany and Jordan shared that they never wanted to miss class because they did not want to miss out of what was happening in class. Tiffany said, “Dance was always exciting and I looked forward to making up dances in groups, performing for each other, and learning new styles of dance” (Individual Conversation, Jan. 5, 2013). Jordan shared that she liked the freedom dance gave her to use her creativity when making up dances and creating her dance projects for the class.

Good teaching enhances student engagement through careful planning and teaching. Building caring relationships with students, where they believed the teacher had an invested interest in their learning, motivated them to work hard and therefore find success in the Dance Academy Program. Creating a fun learning environment where both the

teachers and students were excited to come to class had a powerful impact in engaging students in class. Good teachers show an invested interest in who and what they are teaching and motivate students to reach their full potential. These students are actively engaged and find meaning in the class, leading to their success.

The Research Study

The data gathered in this study emphasized the positive aspects that a high school Dance Academy program can have on the experiences of the students who take part in it. Questions were posed to the students to outline challenges and negative issues within their dance experiences, however, the participants mainly highlighted their positive memories. Two students mentioned that there are always cliques that happen in classes but for the most part there were very positive relationships in their dance classes. Secondly, Michael as the only male participant said it would be nice if more males were involved in the dance classes. There are always challenges in teaching and learning and negative aspects are also a part of daily experiences in classrooms. If the researcher interviewed students who did not explore the dance program opportunities past enrolling for one or two years, their stories may have reflected different themes and insights.

Selecting post-graduate students from the dance program served as a profitable data collection source. Conversations and interviews garnered rich information from the participants. Due to the preceding student/teacher relationship between the researcher and the participants, a comfort level was already established which likely facilitated an open sharing of experiences.

Implications for Future Research

This research project was unique in focusing on students' experiences in a high school dance program and its relevance to student engagement. Through the interviewing process, the participants shared their experiences in the Dance Academy and four themes emerged demonstrating an increase in 1) self-confidence, 2) building relationships, 3) sense of belonging, and 4) an improved sense of self-worth.

The findings from this study provide a basis for future research. Conducting more interviews with students participating in dance programs could provide more data to determine if learning through dance in schools can increase confidence, build relationships, improve students sense of belonging and improve one's sense of self-worth. Continued research on the implication that the arts can lead to an increase in student engagement could also be beneficial for developing future curricular programming.

School divisions could consider the outcomes of this study in consideration of implementing a dance program in their schools. Schools need to be mindful of curriculum potential and provide a wide-variety of learning opportunities for students that move beyond the core academic subjects. For schools that have issues with student engagement, offering a specialized dance program may be appealing to many of their students and may provide them with a more positive experience and something for the students to look forward to at school. When students attach themselves to their learning they want to be present in more meaningful ways in school. If something like the study of dance can satisfy a student's sense of engagement in a school and within a subject area, then there are positive systemic outcomes that provide students with the possibilities for further engaging in learning, not only about subjects but about themselves as well.

When students feel successful, they are empowered to explore learning more openly and engage in meaningful experiences during high school.

Although both male and female past participants were invited to respond there were not a large number of boys who met the requirements for the study; having participated in the dance program all four years. Unfortunately, dance is still not a widely acceptable movement form for many high school boys. Although, Michael was a male voice of one, it was important to hear of his experiences and contribute to the overall data. This study was not about gender specifics within dance experience; however, further studies may attend to a gender related question.

Final Thoughts

Exposing students to the art of dance can lead to many benefits that could positively affect their high school experience. With dance students use their bodies to communicate and convey a message, tell stories, change functional movement into expressive movement while building creative critical responses to learning and movement. Dance encourages creativity and challenges students to step out of their comfort zone. Performance opportunities, although stressful in the beginning, provide spaces where students gain confidence through these performances and build transferable presentation skills applicable to many aspects of school and life.

Through these experiences students build strong relationships with their peers and teachers fostering a caring and supportive learning environment. The newfound confidence encourages students to be more involved within their school, which increases their overall sense of belonging.

Dance is an art form with many benefits and as educators we must ensure students

have the opportunity to explore their creative side to reap the rewards that dance can offer students. Dance programs such as the Dance Academy offered at Prairie Collegiate provides all students the opportunity to engage in dance that may not be able to afford dance lessons outside of school.

A Dance Academy can impact the entire school. Dancers can bring a school to life by their high-energy performances, and provide school spirit at pep rallies and other school events. By being involved in a Dance Academy program, students can feel a sense of pride and accomplishment that they are part of a program that is recognized by the entire student body.

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Appendix A

Interview Questions:

1. Prior to grade 9 describe your dance background or prior dance experiences.
2. Please share what you feel you learned through this dance program.
 - About yourself
 - About others
 - About the dance curriculum
3. How did the dance curriculum offered to you in high school impact your overall high school experience?
4. In what ways was the dance program a positive experience for you? A challenging experience for you? What would you say were the greatest contributing factors?
5. Did the dance program increase your self-confidence? Do you feel the performance opportunities enhanced your self-confidence?
6. Describe the relationships that were developed between you and both staff and students that participated in the dance program. How did these relationships affect your experiences in high school?
7. What skills did the dance program equip you with that you can use in the future?
8. Did the dance program provide you with an increased sense of belonging in the school?
9. Did the dance program encourage you to be more involved in school clubs and activities?
10. What do you consider the benefits or drawbacks of having a dance program in high school?
11. What other extra-curricular activities were you involved in throughout your four years in high school?

*Subsequent questions for further interviews will emerge from the initial interviews.

Appendix B

Participant Consent Form

Dear Participant,

I seek your participation in my research project for the partial fulfillment of the requirements of the degree, Master of Education in Curriculum Studies. The title of my study is; The Experiences of a high school dance curriculum on student engagement. Please read this form carefully, and feel free to call me with any additional questions you might have.

Research Supervisor:

Dr. Brenda Kalyn: 966-7566
Department of Curriculum Studies

Graduate Student:

Coralee McNarland: 382-8586
Master Of Education Student
Department of Curriculum Studies
cdc128@mail.usask.ca

Purpose and Objectives of the Research:

The purpose of this research project is to learn from former students: their experiences in the dance program and how these experiences impacted learning and student engagement. In order to obtain different perspectives, students represented in the project will either have completed four years in the high school dance academy program with no dance experience, little experience or extensive studio training.

The objectives of the study are to: a) examine the benefits of specialized dance programs in a public high school in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan; b) learn the experiences of former dance students to determine the impact this program had on their learning and c) to find out if specialized programs such as the dance academy program can increase student engagement.

The overall goal of this study is to provide school boards and other educational institutions with information regarding students' experiences in school dance programs to further support education through these experiences in dance.

Methods and Procedure:

This research will provide school divisions and other educational institutions with evidence of the value and benefits of the dance program at the high school level. This research project will also offer the students and the teacher of the dance program an opportunity to reflect on their experiences and share their own personal stories to impact learning for the future.

Through this research project, I wish to understand your learning experiences within your four-year dance program in high school. To do this, I am inviting you to be a participant of this study. If you agree, the data (or information) will be gathered by two audio-recorded interviews as well as one group interview with that participants involved. The interviews will take place in a quiet location that is convenient and comfortable. I anticipate that

each interview will require approximately one hour of your time. You may withdraw from the study at any time without cause or penalty and data collected will be destroyed. You have the right to ask for the audio recording to be stopped at any point in the interview. The audio recording will be transcribed and later given to the participants to read over for accuracy.

Storage of Data:

During collection and analysis, the gathered information from your participation in the study, namely the audio recordings and transcripts, will be stored in a locked cabinet in my home. The information gathered on computer and shared e-mails between all participants will also be secured on my password protected personal laptop used to conduct this study.

Upon completion of the research study, the data will be kept in a secure location at the University of Saskatchewan. Dr. Brenda Kalyn, Department of Curriculum Studies in accordance with the University of Saskatchewan ethics guidelines, will keep this research for a minimum of five years.

Dissemination of Results:

The results of the study will be used to complete my Master's of Education degree in Curriculum Studies. The study may be published through articles in a scholarly journal or presented at a conference/seminar.

Risk, Benefit, and Deception:

There is no known or for-seeable risk for you in this project. Your participation in this study has potential to benefit the educational community by sharing your personal experiences of taking dance at the high school level.

Confidentiality:

You will not be identified in any way in the writing of the study. You will be provided a pseudonym (fake name) to protect your identity. Your answers in your personal interview will remain private; however in the group interviews I cannot guarantee privacy there as you will be responding as a group to the questions and obviously others might know who you are.

The confidentiality of participants will be protected using pseudonyms. The researcher may use quotes given throughout the interview process while keeping confidentiality in tact.

Data/Transcript Release:

Within several weeks of the interview, data/transcript release forms will be delivered to your home address by e-mail. You will have the opportunity to review, revise, add or delete your statements from the transcript to accurately reflect what you said or intended to say.

You will have the opportunity to sign the data/transcript release forms once you are comfortable with what is in print in order to release them to be used in the manner described in this form. The release form will then be placed in the self-addressed envelope and mailed back to me.

Debriefing and Feedback:

You will be provided with a finished copy of the research project. You will also have public access to the completed study in the University of Saskatchewan library.

Questions:

If at any point you have questions concerning the study, please feel free to contact me or my supervisor, Dr. Brenda Kalyn at the telephone numbers provided above. The Behavioral Research Ethics Board, University of Saskatchewan on November 14, 2012, has approved this study. Any questions regarding your rights as a participant may be addressed to the Ethics Office toll free at 1-888-966-2975.

Consent of Participation:

- I have read and understood the description provided above.
- I have been provided with an opportunity to ask questions and my questions have been answered satisfactorily.
- I consent to participate in the study described above; understanding that I may withdraw this consent at any time without cause or penalty of any sort and any data collected will be destroyed.
- A copy of this consent form has been given to me for my records.

(Signature of Participant)

(Date)

(Home Address)

(Phone Number)

(Signature of Researcher)

(Date)

Coralee McNarland
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mcnarlandc@spsd.sk.ca

Appendix C

Transcript Release

This is to verify that I have read over my transcripts and they accurately reflect my experiences. I provide permission for the use of these transcripts in the research conducted by Coralee McNarland.

Signed:

Date:

Printed:

Printed:
